Rolling Stone

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2023
ISSUE 013

UK

TROYE SIVAN
The poppers-fuelled liberation of the next global superstar

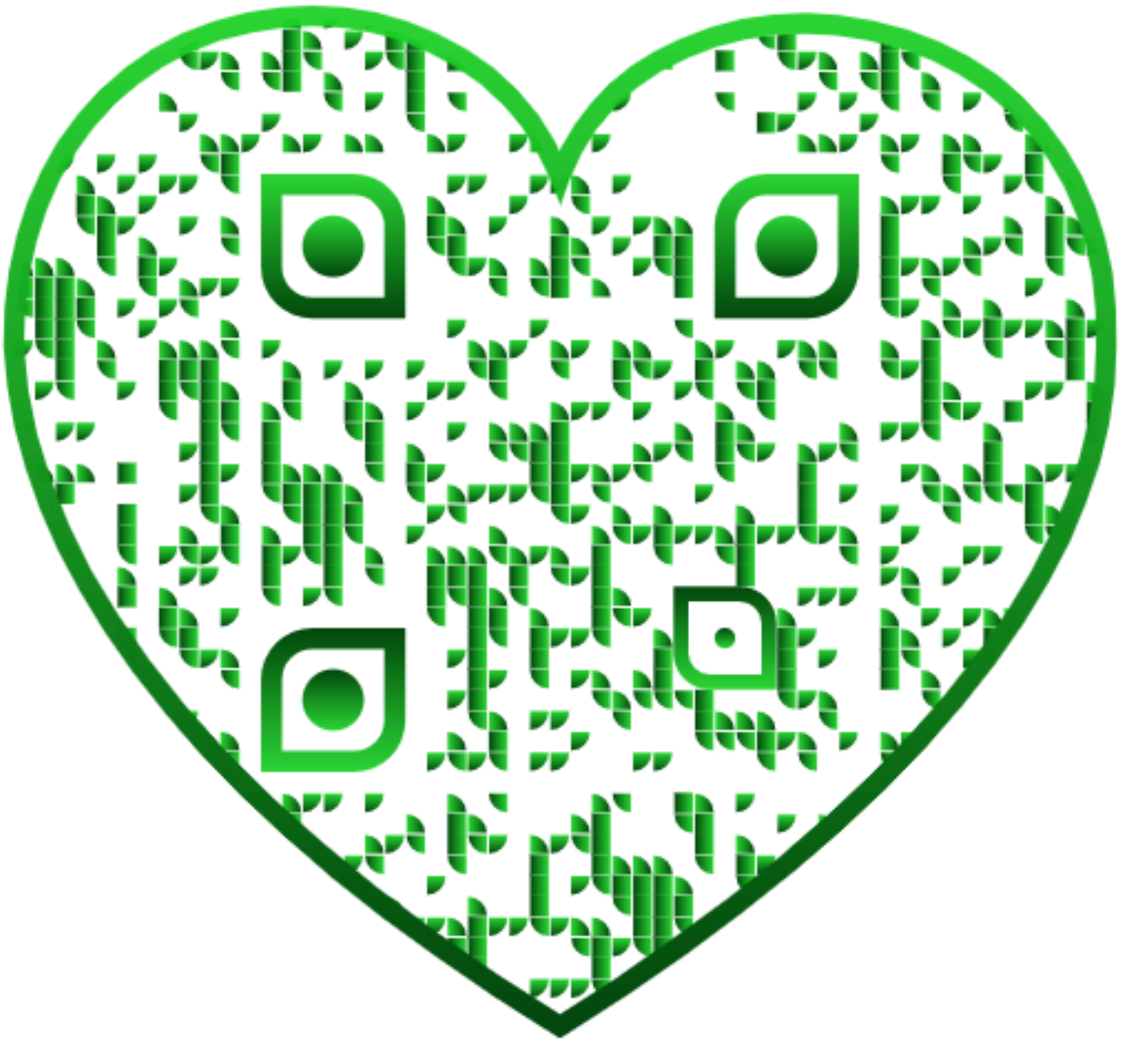
LEIGH-ANNE
Embracing identity, independence and dreams

FREDO
How death and life upturned the rapper's world

+

Karol G
Sigur Rós
Priya Ragu
Eve Hewson
Holly Humberstone
Bombay Bicycle Club
Beverley Knight
Alabama 3
Ethel Cain
Tyla

KYLIE
THE BEATING HEART OF POP



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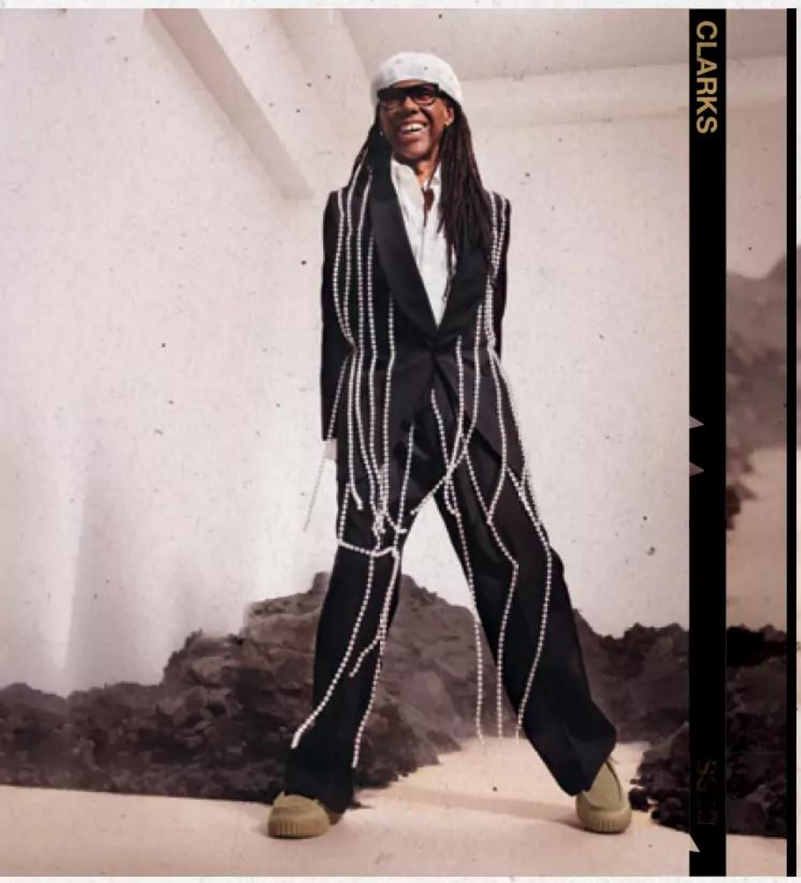

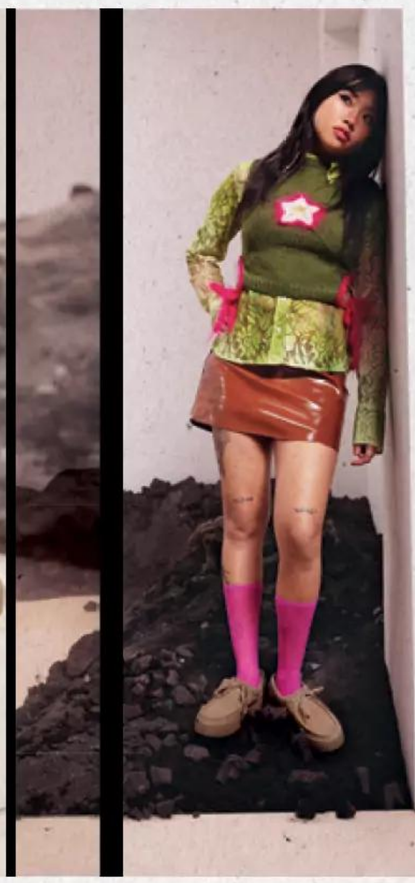

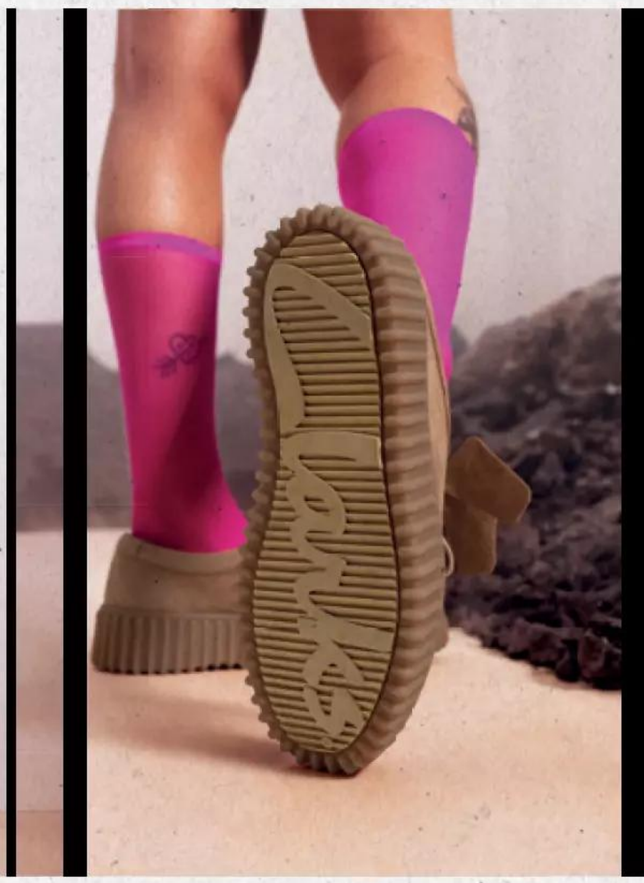

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ISSUE 013

"I haven't lived my destiny out yet"

Leigh-Anne

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Mariano Vivanco**

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EVELYN FREJA

FEARS
BRISTOL

Editor's Letter

Celebrating a pop icon as well as the music artists just starting out

WHEN IT COMES to hits, Kylie Minogue is not short of them. At 55, and with a career that spans five decades (don't ask me how that maths works, my speciality is in words not numbers – much to the chagrin of my accountant), Ms Minogue could have happily continued making music without chasing another top 10 hit to add to her collection of 34 singles that had landed at the top end of the UK charts. (Or to her impressive 51 top 40 singles, if you want to include her broader discography!)

All that changed when 'Padam Padam' became not just the song of the summer, but an anthem that inspired a million memes. Touching the sweet spot of where a track becomes not just a hit record but part of the zeitgeist, it evolved into a bona-fide cultural moment. The biggest artists in the world are lucky (lucky, lucky – sorry, couldn't resist) to experience one or two of these ever-elusive globe-spanning moments in their career. Yet Kylie has nailed it on multiple occasions.

"The biggest artists in the world are lucky to experience one or two of these ever-elusive globe-spanning moments in their career. Yet Kylie has nailed it on multiple occasions"

Her latest achievement is all the more extraordinary when viewed in the context of streaming: over the past decade it has made scoring a hit single that bit harder for musicians whose core audience was established before the rise of social media.

So, when an artist who's been releasing music since 1987 debuts their new single in 2023 and seizes the attention of not just their OG fans, but new and younger listeners as well, and in doing so scores a UK number one airplay hit, it's worth taking a beat to look back at that person's phenomenal career and understand how and why their musical currency is still as powerful today as it was more than 35 years ago.

Elsewhere in this issue, we continue the momentum and move the focus onto just some of the other artists who are breaking the mould and carving out their own inspiring niche in music. From Troye Sivan to Ethel Cain, via Karol G and Priya Ragu, these pages are packed to popping with standout musicians at the top of their game.

CLIFF JOANNOU
EDITOR IN CHIEF

ON THE COVER

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Rebel at Heart

Thomas Sabo

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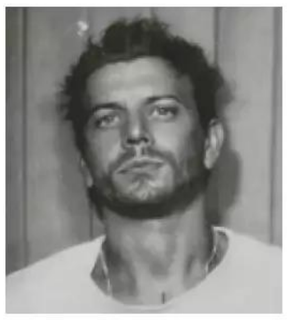


Ed Cooke

Photographer

Drawing from cinematic references, I wanted to gravitate towards rich, inky greens and blues in the undertones of the shoot with Kylie. To have a subject like her who can amplify a space with her unique energy and presence brings a whole different atmosphere to a set. These shoots take a small village of incredibly talented people, so keeping the space comfortable, light and enjoyable is key to a good, collaborative environment.

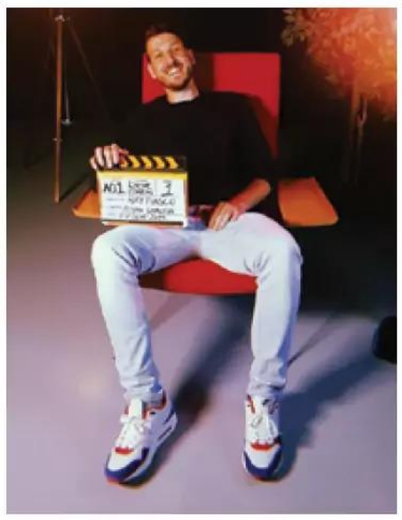
Amzy OBR

Photographer

Fredo is a man of his people and an inspiration to me. Not only is he one of the UK's top artists, but his work ethic and drive motivate me to go even harder. Working with him and Rolling Stone UK is one of the biggest milestones in my career. If you follow any major musician in the UK, "Shot by @AmzyOBR" is a caption you'll be familiar with. My career has always required a delicate balancing act to move forward, both within challenging gender disparity in the photo pits to staying strong in my Muslim faith. I am guided by a combination of passion and faith, with both reminding me to be thankful for every shot I am blessed enough to take.

Seth Pereira

Writer



It was the second time that Fredo and I had met, and a lot had happened in both our lives since then. Time and success hadn't changed the fact that Fredo remained a reticent interlocutor, but clearly there was a story to be told. Getting that to shine through when faced with reserve was a challenge that I relished.

A real love for storytelling is what drives my writing and is at the core of anything I create. These days, I've been blessed with the opportunity to write about Black music and its innumerable offshoots, but I'm also no stranger to the odd piece of political journalism or penning stories about the far corners of the gaming universe.

Mariano Vivanco

Photographer

It's always a pleasure to work with Leigh-Anne Pinnock, who has been a friend for a long time. She's amazing and so easy to photograph! The creative process for this shoot began, as they all do, with my first feelings after the commission came in. I gravitated towards clean, iconic imagery of some of our great female singers: Madonna, Tina Turner and Neneh Cherry, for example. We also had some Iman images by Matthew Rolston as references, which led us to all love the large hair. Working with stylist Georgia Medley was a total pleasure. We had a great chat where we decided to keep silhouettes minimal. Princess Diana's see-through dress was even on our mood board!

The day was a total blast, as we expected it to be, but Leigh-Anne and Georgia took it a step further and we created the glitter photo that made the digital cover. A great day and great memories for my first Rolling Stone cover!

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Take your pick

Gibson is returning to two classic designs from its past and bringing them right up to date for a new generation of music-makers. The new Les Paul™ Standard 60s Plain Top (pictured above left) features a solid mahogany body with a plain maple top and a SlimTaper™ 60s-style mahogany neck with a rosewood fingerboard. Costing £2,599, it's available in six shades including this gorgeous Inverness Green. Also making a comeback is the Les Paul™ Standard 50s (pictured right). Priced at £2,899, it boasts a solid mahogany body and an AA-figured maple top, which is showcased with a distinctive translucent lacquer finish. The mahogany neck has a rounded 50s-style profile and a rosewood fingerboard. Choose from six colours including Ocean Blue, as displayed here.

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Home and away

Mytheresa's chief buying officer Tiffany Hsu (pictured) has been turning her attention to travel, homeware and lifestyle for the luxury retail platform. Pieces including luggage from Gucci and Globe-Trotter and beach bags from Missoni will satisfy the stylish traveller. For alfresco summer eating, there are vibrant technicolour glassware and dining sets from brands such as Polspotten, Klimchi, Bitossi, Versace and NasonMoretti that will work just as well in your back garden as outside a villa in Sicily. Mytheresa is also offering monochrome and muted earthy moments in tableware, office items, plush cushions and blankets from critically acclaimed designers, brands and artists such as Tom Dixon, Loewe, Loro Piana, Etro and Zaha Hadid. It's all sumptuous, sleek and incredibly chic.

MYTHERESA.COM

Opening Act

Days of their lives

Published to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the band's first major tour, *Queen Uncovered: Unseen photographs, rarities and insights from life with a rock 'n' roll band* features new images from head roadie Peter Hince, who lived the ultimate dream, working alongside the band for 13 years during their meteoric rise. Published by Welbeck and available from 12 October, the book tracks life on the road and in the studio, portraying both intimate moments backstage and the extreme energy on-stage, to offer a fascinating insight into one of the most influential British bands ever.

A canine encounter for cat-lover Freddie Mercury

In a lava

Celebrating 60 years, iconic British brand Mathmos — inventor of the lava lamp — has partnered with luminaries from across fashion and design including Rankin, Sabine Marcelis, Studio Job and Camille Walala to reimagine the 60s design classic with a contemporary twist. Founded in 1963 by British inventor, entrepreneur and eccentric Edward Craven Walker, the company has been led by Cressida Granger since 1989. Manufactured at its base in Dorset, each lamp is hand-filled in the Poole factory with millions exported globally. This genuinely British icon is ready for its renaissance.

Opening Act

Winter blues

Outdoor brand The North Face has brought back the Mountain Jacket to shield you from the elements in style, whether you're pounding city pavements or going off-grid in the countryside. Made from durable Gore-Tex in a denim shade, the packable, waterproof jacket is a perfect example of The North Face's knack for combining fashion with utility in its outerwear, so you stay warm and dry while looking cool af...

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IMAGE PROVIDED BY THE NORTH FACE/DOMINIK ZIMMERMANN

Doggy style

Snoop Dogg is bringing his distinctive style to Skechers with the Skechers x Snoop Dogg collaboration. The West Coast entertainment icon has Snoopified styles, materials, colourways and prints to ensure that the collection is in step with his unique streetwear aesthetic. One of three styles in the initial drop, the Snoop One Double G (pictured) includes his favourite feature, the Skechers Hands Free Slip-ins®, so he can slide into his kicks and go (whether that's to the studio or on stage). To add his spin, Snoop has selected paisley bandana prints for the premium leather and the Snoop S branding for the toe bumper. And if you're on the go like Snoop, you'll also appreciate the bungee lace and Skechers' Exclusive Heel Pillow™, which holds your foot firmly in place. The capsule celebrates a Skechers and Snoop synergy that could have been written in the stars.

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you ditched
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the Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Southern comfort

Rising South African Amapiano and pop priestess Tyla is making waves across the globe, and proudly showcasing her culture

TYLA STEPS ONTO the stage and commands attention at gargantuan decibels. Surrounded by undulating ultramarine and tangerine lights, the South African singer-songwriter and dancer delivers honeyed vocals while rocking her hips, locking eyes with the camera and weaving her body around the circumference of Vevo's Hackney Wick studio with the transfixing prowess of a seasoned pro. In a handful of takes, Tyla and her close-knit team of South African creatives have recorded 'Water', the summer single from her highly anticipated debut EP, and it's instantly clear why the rising star is making waves around the globe.

Of Indian, Zulu, Mauritian and Irish descent, and born and bred in Johannesburg, Tyla proved her insatiable hunger to sing and perform from a young age, whether that was belting out songs for her primary school or for YouTube followers or boldly hustling her music to the likes of DJ Khaled and Drake.

Her break-out 2020 music video 'Getting Late' gained meteoric traction that saw the self-titled 'popiano' artist achieve national fame and set her career on an upward trajectory in the US. Since then, Tyla's inked a deal with Epic and released follow-up dance-floor heaters such as 'To Last' and 'Been Thinking'. It's been a hectic year so far. She made her debut live performance at spring's Milan Fashion Week, followed by London's O2 arena when she jumped on the European leg of Chris Brown's Under The Influence tour. Next, she electrified fans at Afro Nation in Portugal with her most powerful performance to date.

When we meet in east London, she's just linked up with Ayra Starr for their collab 'Girl Next Door'. As Tyla gears up to drop her debut EP this autumn, she's keen to talk about where her journey began, and the message she hopes to send with her music. At every turn, Tyla's passionate about showcasing South Africa's culture and carving out a lane for the new generation of African artists.

What sparked your passion to sing?

I was born a singer. I've always gravitated towards it. I would tell everybody that I was going to be a pop star. [Ever since I was] really small, I listened to all genres of music, danced and made up shows for my family or wrote songs for my mom and dad's birthdays.

Do you remember your first performance?

Yes! I was probably about 10 and sang '(How Much Is) That Doggie in the Window' for my primary school. My gran was screaming in the crowd!

When did your own music start to develop?

I wrote my first lyrics in a diary my mom gave me when I was 12 years old and would sing them over YouTube beats. Then I started recording and posting videos of original songs and covers, like Beyoncé and Boyz II Men, on TikTok and Instagram.

Who were your early influences?

I listened to a lot of South African artists. I loved Freshlyground because I couldn't believe they were on a song – 'Waka Waka' – with Shakira. I really looked up to 90s singers like Aaliyah, also Rihanna and Cassie. They were artists whose concerts I watched constantly and imagined myself being one day.

If you hadn't become a singer, what would you have done?

For a quick second, I considered engineering. I thought if my parents were forcing me to go to school, I was going to study something that would make me rich! But after a lot of begging and crying, I told them I wanted to be a singer, and they finally agreed to let me take a gap year. Sadly, that year happened to be 2020, the year

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Annie Reid**

of Covid. I thought, 'What a waste! That was supposed to be my year to break!' I was so down.

How did you take matters into your own hands and turn your fate around?

I started DMing tons of people across the industry my original music and covers. I've always been very ambitious. If I want something, I make sure I get it. I just thought they would reply, [and] I'd be flown out and blow up like Justin Bieber. Most went unread, but I was persistent. I already had a strong social media presence, so I asked my followers to give me a topic or genre to write about. I'd do it and post the video, and soon one of those caught my manager's attention and I was discovered.

What happened next?

He sent me a beat and told me to write a song from scratch. I stayed up the whole night trying to make it perfect. The following day, we met with my parents, and I recorded on a mic for the first time in a small booth at his house. I was very nervous, and it was weird hearing my voice back. But I signed with him, and every weekend for the rest of the year, my best friend and I would go to his studio, record music and make photo shoots.

How did you carve out your sound?

I wanted to create a fresh sound and make it more me. I felt like so much of the same thing was coming out, and we needed some flavour. So I kept the log drum but added pop structure to carve out my own 'popiano' fusion. My music is always driven by the beats. Once I hear the beat, I work out the melody and the words come last. When people hear my music, I hope they can't stop dancing. Even if my song is emotional, and you're crying and dancing at the same time, I hope that the beat makes you want to move!

Your breakout single 'Getting Late' went viral and was nominated for Music Video of the Year at the 28th South African Music Awards in 2022. How did it come together?

I'm involved in all of my creative. I love creating concepts, so I knew what I wanted it to look like, but because of Covid we didn't have a lot of budget. It took a year for myself, my best friend, who is a stylist, and my manager to make it. My manager shot it himself and pitched in his own cash, and we rounded up a collective of local creatives we knew. Every chance we got, we shot little scenes. By 2021, we dropped it and it changed my whole life.

At what point did you feel your hard work paying off?

I posted a teaser of 'Getting Late' on Twitter, and my page started going viral, especially among South Africans. My Instagram was blowing up. Everyone was retweeting and reposting like "Wow! Is this from here?" It was a shock because I don't think anyone in South Africa had put that much effort into their own music video before. Immediately, labels started hounding me and I was constantly on Zoom calls thinking 'What the hell? I don't even know how this works?!' In the end, I signed to Epic because of their passion, and that's when everything else started.

"The minute I step on the stage, I feel electric"

How did you celebrate?

I always pictured places like America to be an alternative universe. Like, I never saw it as a real place, it just seemed like somewhere you see in the movies. So, the fact that they were reaching out and pitching deals to me, I was so overwhelmed, like "Yo!" I couldn't even believe they knew me. 'Getting Late' had millions of streams. I couldn't believe that everyone was doing TikTok dances to my song. I showed my parents every single one. My mother was watching with me the whole night. My family was so proud.

Where does your confidence on stage come from?

I pray beforehand because it calms me and helps me to feel grounded. But the minute I step on the stage, I feel electric and I don't want to ever get off. I always feel like I'm playing a character, and it's so fun. I feel like I'm this rock-star Barbie doll.

What's your biggest challenge?

A lot of times I feel like I have imposter syndrome. I know I deserve this and everyone around me is cheering and telling me "You deserve this," but this opportunity is so big! It's never been given to a South African pop artist, and I don't take that lightly. I want to make my home proud.

What does it mean to you to be kicking down doors so that other South African artists can come through?

I really want eyes on all African artists because we need more attention. I love my country and my continent. It's hugely important to me for our country to have an artist that breaks and crosses over, and I would love to be the artist that gives that to Africa and South Africa.

What message do you want to send with your music?

I feel like my music is pushing the culture in front of a greater audience, and that's what I'm pushing for in my music. TRACY KAWALIK

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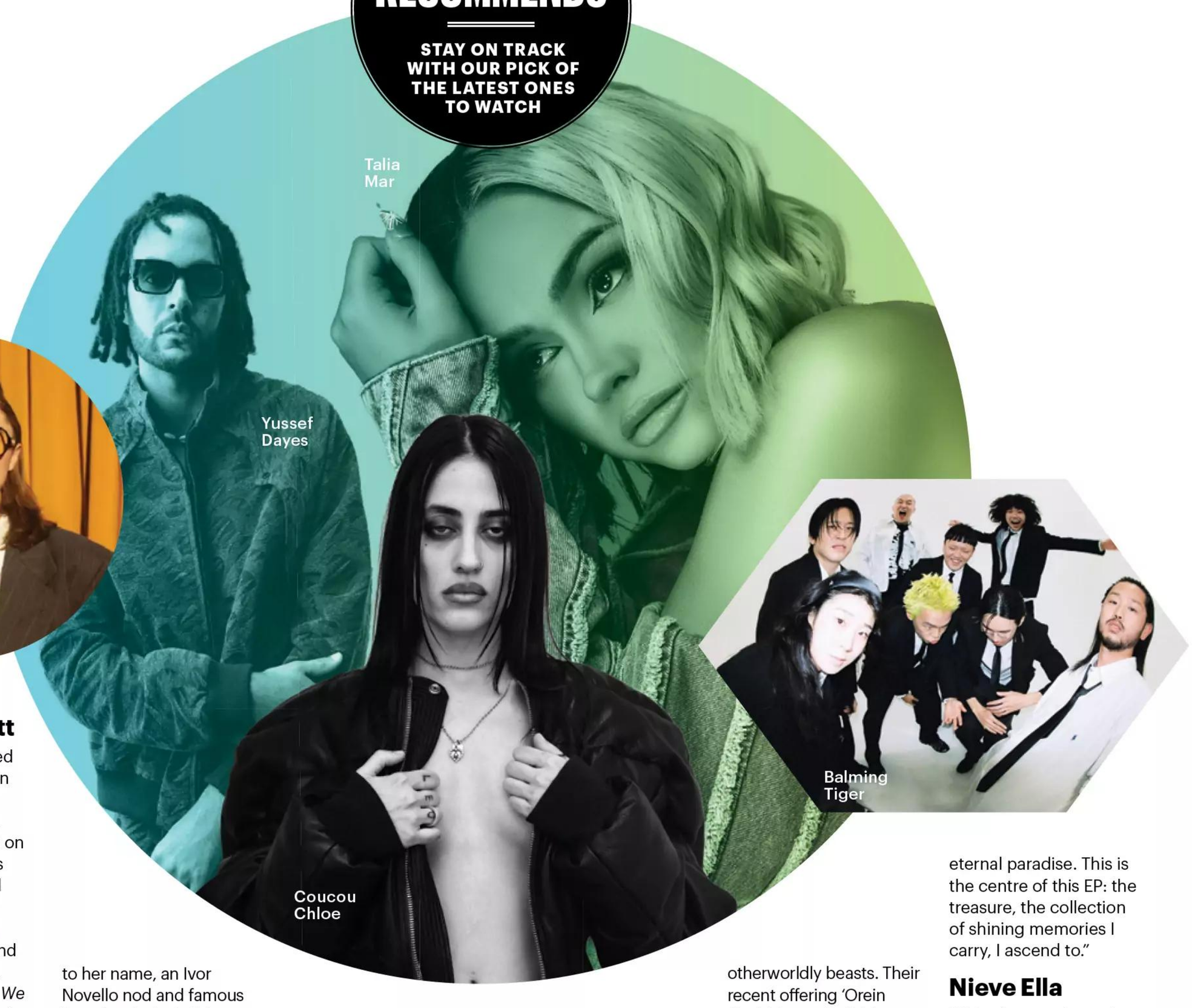

James Marriott

He may have attracted a captive audience on streaming sites like Twitch and YouTube, but James Marriott is on a mission to show his music is the real deal too, taking influence from the likes of The Strokes, Bloc Party and Foals, to name a few. His debut album *Are We There Yet?* is set to arrive later this year.

Yussef Dayes

Music has followed Yussef Dayes for his whole life. He began drumming at four, was tutored by Miles Davis' drummer Billy Cobham by 10 and soon became rightly regarded as a prodigious jazz talent. But as his debut album *Black Classical Music* reveals, he's a kaleidoscopic star who refuses to be put in one box. The wide array of guests on the record — including Chronixx and Tom Misch — is testament to his brilliant, genre-spanning vision.

Luz

Irish newcomer Luz has over 120 million streams to her name, an Ivor Novello nod and famous fans that include Ed Sheeran, Dua Lipa and Dermot Kennedy. Take one listen to her music, however, and you'll soon see why this is the case. Her songs effortlessly pair her powerfully delicate voice against tales of her personal struggles with neurodiversity and sexuality. As those streams attest, her messages have already chimed with a legion of fans.

Ellie Dixon

Cambridge-born Ellie Dixon produces masterful alt-pop that effortlessly tackles the malaise and maelstrom of our very complicated modern society. On recent single 'Dopamine', she sings of the deeply unhealthy hits of happiness that we all seek from social media.

"Even positive experiences need balancing by calm and I have found myself craving stillness. I hope it can help more people to take some time to rebalance and step out of the constant stimulation in the world around us," she says.

Balming Tiger

This ever-evolving music/arts collective bills themselves as the only "alternative K-pop band", providing a fresh slant on the hugely popular genre. The fluid group now consists of close to a dozen singer-songwriters, rappers, producers and directors, while recent single 'Sexy Nukim' features an excellent cameo from BTS member RM.

Talia Mar

Having secured guest vocals on radio smashes such as Sigala's 'Stay the Night' and Nathan Dawe's 'Good On You', Talia Mar is quickly becoming one of UK pop's most in-demand voices. But as her own music and a fledgling fan base (aptly named the Martians, geddit?) demonstrate, the Brit school graduate will soon become equally as known for her own tunes too.

Belako

Spanish rockers Belako flit between riff-filled wonders and more curious psych-driven otherworldly beasts. Their recent offering 'Orein Orain' is proof of this, as the band switch between their native Basque tongue and English to tell of a mystical place full of clouds, deer and ghost towns. More of that mystique can surely be expected on their second album, the upcoming *Sigo Regando*.

Sarah Kinsley

US star Sarah Kinsley crafts alt-pop tracks that deal in human connection. She says of new EP *Ascension*: "It's about this unknown, ethereal place — the islands we create with people we have loved, where our phrases with them live, where our conversations outlast us, where every moment we have experienced lives again and again. It's an eternal paradise. This is the centre of this EP: the treasure, the collection of shining memories I carry, I ascend to."

Nieve Ella

With a burgeoning cult fandom behind her, Nieve Ella is proving a dab hand at delivering guitar-pop that's brilliantly indebted to the sound of the 90s. The stand-out 'His Sofa', which arrived earlier this year, is a break-up anthem in the making.

Coucou Chloe

On upcoming project *Fever Dream*, French producer Coucou Chloe promises a project about life. "The more you grow and understand living and the complexities of your emotions, the more you can express that," she says. The first single, 'Drift', is a bass-driven ballad filled with pulsating basslines and synths that propel the track to another dimension.

★★★★★

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‘ROOF-RAISING, LIFE-AFFIRMING AND IRRESISTIBLY UPLIFTING’

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

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MUSIC

Sweet home Alabama

Rolling Stone UK meets The Sopranos' *Uncle Junior in a Brixton studio with Alabama 3, the band who wrote the TV classic's 'Woke Up This Morning' theme, to discuss their new collaboration*

By WILL RICHARDS

AS I ENTER the Brixton HQ of acid-house band Alabama 3, 92-year-old Dominic Chianese – aka Corrado Soprano or Uncle Junior in iconic HBO show *The Sopranos* – is in the band's recording booth with his walking stick, laying down a foreboding spoken-word vocal. "*Though I walk through the valley of evil, I will never drink tequila again*," he says in his Bronx drawl as the band's founding members, Rob Spragg and Nick Reynolds, roar with laughter and approval next door at the mixing desk.

The song, 'If I'd Never Seen the Sunshine', appears on the band's new album *Cold War Classics Vol. 2*. The genesis of the unlikely collaboration took place in 2019 at the first-ever *Sopranos* Con in New Jersey. As well as being an actor, Chianese is also a tenor singer and performed at the convention. There he met Alabama 3, who wrote *The Sopranos*' unmistakable theme song, 'Woke Up This Morning', and struck up a friendship.

Chianese then promised to visit the band in their London studio, coming good on his word four years later. "We knew Dominic as an actor, and we did our performance of 'Woke Up This Morning', and then he came on stage and blew the fucking roof off with this Neopolitan opera singing!" Spragg explains of how they met at *Sopranos* Con.

"I sang 'Parla Piu Piano', which is a song Nino Rota wrote for *The Godfather*," Chianese remembers of that day. "It's a very personal song. It's not about romance – to me it's really about father and son, mother and daughter, two brothers. It's about this familial bond. This bond is precious, and when I sing it, I think about my father and what he taught me."

"It was beautiful – you could hear a pin drop when he sang it!" Spragg smiles.

"It reminds all the young Italian guys of their grandfathers!" adds Chianese.

"We had a chat about linking up together, and then Dominic rang us up," says Spragg.

In our conversation, Chianese, Spragg and Reynolds discuss their new collaboration, how they bonded over *The Sopranos*, and the healing power of music.

What was it like meeting at *Sopranos* Con?

Reynolds: Straight away, Dominic was super friendly. Obviously we'd all seen *The Sopranos*, and these guys [from the cast] were the real stars at this event. It just so happened that this tune by us was used for the series. What really blew us away, was that in their mind, we were the big shots.

Spragg: All the cast rushed the stage and grabbed the mic when we were singing 'Woke Up This Morning', but when [Dominic] was singing, no fucking chance! It was silence!

And what did you bond over when you met?

Spragg: The idea that music is healing. We do this thing called the Black Swansong, where people write a song about someone on their deathbed, and they all sing together as a family. Music transcends all emotions and is a thing that brings people together. The only reason that Dominic is here in our studio is because of music.

Chianese: I worked with the elderly back in the 80s, and there was a woman who couldn't have been more than 50. She had severe Alzheimer's, and I gave her the words to 'Stardust'. She sang every single word like she was Ella Fitzgerald. I hang out with a guy where I live now every Tuesday, and I gave him a harmonica. I'm telling you, he's playing the harmonica now, and he wasn't even able to talk. It's really helping people, and doing more of this would save a lot of money, especially when we're fighting the pharmaceutical companies.

ROB BLACKHAM

"Dominic came on stage and blew the roof off with this Neopolitan opera singing!"
— *Rob Spragg*

How early did the power of music become apparent to you?

Chianese: When I was 15 years old, I left New York for a while and went to a nursing home in a suburb. I did it for 30 years whenever I wasn't working. The MO was to put all of the wheelchairs around the room and create a circle. We'd mix the Alzheimer's patients with the high-functioning patients, and it really worked. I'll never forget this little old Irish lady called Annie. She'd be there, and I'd be singing for an hour and a half, and she'd be [moving her fingers] as if she was playing piano, with perfect rhythm. One day, she said to me, "Can you sing 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling'?" I said, "Sure, Annie!" So I hit the D chord, and she started the verse and played the whole thing with her fingers in the air. One day, I said to her, "You must have been a wonderful pianist," and she said, "Oh, no, I was a typist!"

What do you remember about 'Woke Up This Morning' being chosen as the theme song for *The Sopranos*?

Spragg: Everyone thinks we wrote the song about gangsters, but it's not even about that! It's about a woman called Sarah Thornton,

LET'S JAM (Above) Nick Reynolds accompanies a guitar-playing Dominic Chianese on the harmonica; (below) the trio talk music

who was raped and beaten up by her copper husband for years and years, and one day she woke up and shot him in the head with his own gun. I didn't write it about the mafia, but with all the issues about his mother that it talks about, [*Sopranos* writer and producer] David Chase said to me, "That's fucking Tony Soprano and his mother!"

Chianese: That's where the whole show comes from, Tony and his mother.

Spragg: And the lyric, "*Your mama always said you'd be the chosen one*", that's Tony!

Chianese: I couldn't believe how beautiful it was, and David was a musician himself. He always wanted to be in a rock band. I knew that he'd choose something beautiful. That opening scene is just wonderful – even my wife, who is very, very English, loves it!

Reynolds: David's original idea was to have a different opening track for each episode, and when he went in to do the pitch, he said that ['Woke Up This Morning'] is going to be the song for episode one. [HBO] actually liked this one, so they stuck with that tune at the start, and had a different song at the end of each episode, which I think worked really well.

Spragg: Have you seen *The Many Saints Of Newark*, Dom?

Chianese: I thought it was very interesting, a good prequel. It gives a little history of how Tony Soprano grew up.

Spragg: At the end of the film, it cuts to black, and our song comes on. I was in the cinema in Brixton watching it, and it was rammed. I'd had a row with my girlfriend so I was a bit pissed off, but the film ended and 'Woke Up This Morning' started and everyone went mad! I just burst into tears. How the fuck have a band from Brixton pretending to be Americans ended up on the best gangster film going?!

You did a pretty good job of pretending to be Americans...

Reynolds: It was at the time of Britpop, and everyone was wearing Union Jacks and being proud to be British. We fucking hated that, and wanted to be the antithesis of it.

Spragg: God bless Blur and Oasis, but I can't imagine them opening *The Sopranos*! David Chase thought he'd found an American, and then realised that we were a Welshman and a Scotsman from south London! That irony made the intro even better though...

It seems like the show has picked up a new audience in recent years...

Spragg: Covid was amazing for it – *The Sopranos* was the most-watched box set in lockdown, and it had a real resurgence. So when Uncle Junior gets in touch with us after Covid and we're all still alive, we had to work together. He came up to us, not the other way around. He was treating us like the celebrities, but he's the real don!

"Everyone was proud to be British. We hated that, and wanted to be the antithesis of it"
— *Nick Reynolds*

And what's the song you've been working on today about?

Spragg: It's got a Berlin, Bowie, Roxy Music vibe. It's about some fella on the wrong side of the wall in Germany with a hangover, feeling alienated and dispossessed. We've got a couple of gangster tracks on the new album, but I don't want Dominic and us to be associated with the Mafia all the time – we've got to do a beautiful love song! Dominic sounds exactly like I wanted him to sound like, a man who will never drink tequila again.

Chianese: I did it once with two Cuban guys and they had to lay me down in a cab! Never again!

Spragg: We should make something else together, Dom.

Chianese: If you've got a guitar and a harmonica, let's do a country song!

Reynolds: Can you play in E?

Chianese: Yeah, let's go!

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MUSIC

‘It feels like a mission for me, this whole music thing’

Priya Ragu’s vivid debut album,* Santhosam, *has been a lifetime in the making. Here, the Tamil-Swiss artist tells Rolling Stone UK how creating music that resonates has become her life’s work

By HOLLIE GERAGHTY

‘EVERYTHING KIND OF made sense, you know?” says Priya Ragu, thoughtfully gesturing towards her head as she recalls a moment of enlightenment. The Tamil-Swiss singer has only been on our video interview for four minutes when we arrive at the end of the story of her debut album, *Santhosam*, which means ‘happiness’ in Tamil. “It’s like me finding my own happiness throughout these songs,” says Ragu.

It’s a word that has continued to reveal itself in different ways throughout the past few years. Not only is it the final lyric on her dynamic new album, but it’s also the name of the song that capped off 2021 debut mixtape, *damnshestamil*. “There’s a lot of symbolism going on,” she says, adding that the true meaning of the word for her is “being content”.

It’s certainly been a journey for the singer, 37, to reach a point where she can confidently say that, having only quit her day job as a technical purchaser for Swiss International Air Lines two years ago. “I really lived a nice, comfortable job,” she says. “But time was just running. I just felt like, ‘Oh man, I don’t want to be this wasted talent. I at least have to try.’”

Ragu got her head down and spent six months in New York working on music back in 2017. By 2020, she had signed to Warner Music after turning down 20 different record labels. But even then, she continued to juggle her music career with an 8-5 job, finally taking the plunge to commit to music full-time in 2021. “I just took a lot of time for myself until I had the confidence to do it. I felt like it was waiting for me to open that door,” she says.

Not even Ragu was prepared for the ease with which her vibrant, shape-shifting sound would find listeners. Her 2020 debut single ‘Good Love 2.0’ – a fluid concoction of R&B and neo-soul that showcases Ragu’s lyrical flair and full-bodied vocals – introduced her own self-made genre she calls ‘Raguwavy’. It’s an ever-evolving melting pot of influences that’s been a lifetime in the making – a fusion of the musical tastes of her and her brother-turned-collaborator, the producer Japhna Gold.

Born and raised in St Gallen, Switzerland, Ragu’s parents were refugees of the Sri Lankan civil war and left the country in the 80s. Growing up, Ragu remained close to her Tamil roots and sang in a family band with her brother on keys and her father playing the tabla. But while music was a core part of her home life, her parents often disapproved of the western music she loved – artists like Lauryn Hill, Brandy and Alicia Keys. If she was going to a jam session or small gig, she’d say she was going to a friend’s birthday party instead. “I think they always knew that I was singing somewhere, but it was never really official,” Ragu says.

The expectation for her to find a spouse also became a sensitive subject in her twenties. The opening track on *Santhosam*, ‘Ammama’s Note’, includes a voice recording of her grandmother asking about marriage, a topic Ragu says she’s “allergic” to. “Arranged marriage is a very normal thing in our culture,” she explains, recalling being 22 years old when her father showed her pictures of potential husbands. “I always felt a resistance towards it, because I felt like there’s more to life than just getting married and having kids. I wanted to achieve something first.”

Despite family clashes, that

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Yeti**

It’s like me finding my own happiness throughout these songs

MISSION STATEMENT Music allows Priya Ragu to share her culture with a global audience

cultural friction actually helped Ragu to refine her assured sound, which can range from breezy and carefree one moment, to boisterous and headstrong the next. "When you create music, where do you pick the ideas from? From the things that you know," she says. Various influences can be heard throughout the album, from 90s hip hop ('Cornerstore'), UK garage ('Easy') and disco-pop ('One Way Ticket'). Elsewhere, traditional South Asian melodies and stirring tabla beats blend into soulful vocals on 'School Me Like That'. "*I took a leap of faith just to place my feelings over reason*," she sings on the emotive track, a celebratory anthem about going with your gut instinct.

Leaning into the music she was raised on has also helped Ragu realign with her culture in new ways, bringing her closer to her parents too. Final track 'Mani Osai', which translates to 'bell sound', was written alongside her brother and father, who helped with its vocals and instrumentals. "The more research you do, the more things you find out, you understand why you are the way you are," she says, adding that her parents are now "super proud".

When answering questions, Ragu often takes long, purposeful pauses, with no filler words or conversational cues. At times, it's tricky to judge if she's finished her sentence or is simply digging deeper for a more truthful answer. It makes sense, though, when she opens up about the profound sense of duty she's now assumed through her music. "It feels like a mission for me, this whole music thing. It's a task that's been given to me," she says.

Along with her desire to focus on "uplifting" music, it's also about sharing her culture with a global audience. With the rising popularity of non-English language acts like K-pop giants BTS and Spanish pop sensation Rosalía, Ragu says the time has never been better, having been inspired by watching MIA blaze the trail before her. "I feel like if I would have done that music 10 years ago, people wouldn't have resonated with it because it was a different time. But now, people are more open to that."

But it goes even deeper than that. The most powerful track on the album was written after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Ragu remembers not being able to finish watching the disturbing video of his last moments that circulated online, while her brother spent two days in his room after seeing it. In the wake of global Black Lives Matter protests, Ragu felt compelled to make a statement with her craft.

"*Officer don't shoot / I got so much shit to do*," she chants on 'Black Goose' after a cacophony of raw, rousing dholak beats. It's a rallying cry for justice that ends with the sound of a shotgun, representing the moment a soul leaves the body. "It just felt like I was channelling something different," she says. "I felt like the whole booth was on fire when I was recording that. And that's the first time I've experienced something like that. I didn't know that I felt so much rage within me."

But where there's shade on *Santhosam*, the light triumphs. On 'Adalam Va!', an energetic track about finding "hope in the darkest of days", as she shared upon its release, Ragu recounts her whirlwind rise: "*2020 got lost in the sauce...'21 was OK, but / '22 on track fo' the cause*." Where, with a debut album now ready to share with the world, does 2023 fit into that equation? "I just feel like '23 will be a year that I will never forget," she says. "Intuition is telling me '23 is gonna be a very, very important year of my life." ®

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PROFILE

Danny Brown comes clean

Fresh out of rehab, he's rapping better than ever and trying to stay away from drugs and alcohol

By ANTHONY MALONE

DANNY BROWN SITS quietly at a hotel restaurant table in Manhattan's West Village, staring off into the distance with a stoic expression. The outdoor seating area is absent of any other guests besides the rapper and his manager, but he'd stand out even in a crowded room: today he has on a vibrant look that includes a blue-gradient collared shirt, an extremely baggy pair of jeans, and the bright red, Astro Boy-esque MSCHF boots that had the internet in a chokehold earlier this year. When a waiter comes by to take any drinks orders, Brown immediately asks him to take away the alcohol menu. "I'm in a good space mentally," he says afterwards. "I'm happy and stuff. I just don't want to be around that right now."

This interview was originally planned to take place in Detroit, Brown's hometown and the place where his addiction issues began. Instead, we're here in New York on an afternoon when Canadian wildfire smoke has blanketed the city in a grey haze. Since relocating from Detroit to Austin in 2021 – and especially since going to rehab this spring – Brown, 42, has been trying to take on a healthier lifestyle. When the waiter returns, he orders duck breast and a Coke.

Brown's fondness for drugs and alcohol has been a key subject of the music that made him one of the wildest, most acclaimed rappers of his generation, going back to his breakthrough 2011 album, *XXX*, where he rapped about taking shots of Hennessy spiked with Molly and "*sniffing Adderall off the counter in my kitchen*". Listening to him back then felt like falling backwards off a cliff – his songs were filled with adrenaline, euphoria and an uncertainty that felt thrilling.

Brown has warm memories of recording *XXX* during off hours at a Detroit studio where he knew an engineer. "I'd be having to wake up at five in the morning, and we'd sneak in there and he'd give me an hour or two to knock out what I can," Brown recalls. "I'd probably knock out three or four songs." In retrospect, that time was also tinged with hints of darkness. "I was wilding," he continues. "I had just started experimenting with drugs and shit. That was when it was the fun stages. But I was old enough to know what I was getting myself into."

Life changed drastically for him following the release of *XXX*. He began touring heavily as he entered his thirties, making consistent money from music for the first time. "Back in those times, I would make albums and I would stress myself out so much about the reception of it," he says. "I would almost do drugs to cope with that shit. I wouldn't sleep. Be up worried that if people said it sucked, my career is over."

Brown sees his seventh studio album, *Quaranta*, due out this autumn, as a chance for closure. It's his most personal album by far, a confessional spurred by pain, isolation and hitting rock bottom. Compared with his past works, he sounds more serious and focused, taking aim at his own shortcomings along with mediocre rappers. "It was almost like, 'I got to get it out,'" he says. "I didn't know how long I was going to be living. It was one of those 'I'm going to say what the fuck I want to say on this shit. I'm going to let everybody know how I'm feeling.'"

As we talk, a man walks by the table and engages Brown in conversation about the changes in fashion among younger generations, sparked by those viral boots. Soon he's offering to sell us some weed. "He would've been my homie a year ago," Brown says with an exhale as the stranger walks away disappointed. "I didn't have any intentions of stopping smoking weed. I was just going to rehab for drinking. But once you get in there, you learn so much shit."

In late March, after a disastrously drunk podcast appearance where he criticised his label, Warp Records, Brown checked into rehab thanks to a grant provided by the Recording Academy's Musicares programme. "I started eating healthy when I was in there because they had good-ass food," he says. "The rehab that I went to, it's fucking $50,000-a-month rehab."

Along with a healthier diet, Brown found faith, spirituality and a new outlook on life in rehab. A decade ago, the idea of death scared him. "I was scared of this shit," he says. "Now, I just look at it like, 'Man, when it's the time, it's the time.' It's almost like life is a school, and when you die, it's graduation. When the higher power is ready for you to graduate, you'll graduate. And obviously, I haven't done what I'm supposed to here."

This realisation didn't strictly begin during his sobriety, he admits: "I had a crazy-ass mushroom trip one time where I saw my grave and shit. So ever since then, I became a lot more comfortable with it."

As recently as last summer, he claims, he was taking up to 14 grams of psilocybin mushrooms each day. "I think that really fucked my brain up," he says. "Because I can lay down and get ready to go to bed, and I can see visuals and shit. A person that never took mushrooms before, they'd be freaked out by the shit I see when I close my eyes." These days, he's sleeping eight to 10 hours a night. "I guess I'm catching up for all the sleep that I wasn't getting

In the early days of the pandemic, Brown says, "I literally was going broke. Before I know it, I just sniffed up my house, and I've got no money coming in"

when I was drugging. And I'm having vivid, movie dreams."

Brown has arguably never been sharper as a rapper than he is right now. *Quaranta* comes after his 2019 album, *uknowhatimsayin¿*, executive-produced by Q-Tip; his surprise collab with JPEGMAFIA this year, titled 'SCARING THE HOES'; and perhaps best of all, a skull-liquefying verse on Billy Woods' 'Year Zero'. "I still love hip-hop," Brown says. "I got to the point where I stopped worrying about the negative and started just looking at all the positives about it."

Unfortunately, he doesn't remember much about that session with Billy Woods, due to being black-out drunk at the time. "I was an alcoholic; I am an alcoholic," he says. "I was walking around the Lower East Side, stopping at bars, drinking everywhere... I probably shouldn't have gone based on where I was at

SPEAK NOW
When he was making his new album, Brown says, "I didn't know how long I was going to be living. It was one of those 'I'm going to say what the fuck I want to say on this shit'"

physically. But when you're blacked-out drunk, you're trying to do whatever's fun. I'm like, 'What? Billy Woods at the studio? Fucking let's go over there!' I went over there and rapped. And I don't even remember that shit."

He wrote most of *Quaranta* at the Bruiser Brigade house in Detroit, where Brown and the artists signed to the label he founded would stay and work on their own projects all day. It was a rough time for Brown: he was going through a bad breakup, and he'd moved to rapidly gentrifying downtown Detroit just as the pandemic set in. "I'm stuck in this fucking penthouse apartment," he says. "Can't even have guests over. The security at the door. I'm in there by myself, depressed, doing fucking coke and getting drunk every night by myself."

At the same time, he was facing financial pressure due to shows getting cancelled, including a booked European tour. "I literally was going broke," he says. "All my savings went bad. My credit card was over. But I was putting it on myself, too. I was doing drugs still. Before I know it, I just sniffed up my house, and I've got no money coming in."

In the past year, he's been rethinking his early life in Detroit in the 80s. For the most part, he had a good home life as a kid, with incentives like video games to distract him from going into the streets. Knowing Brown was into rap music, his dad got him a set of turntables to record. "I was raised around low-budget studio equipment," he says. "I didn't get to go to a real studio until I turned 18 and I got my own money – and by then, I already knew how to fucking do shit."

He says that he and his siblings were often left unsupervised by their young parents: "In some sense, they still wanted to be kids too. They wanted to be able to live their life. My mom still wanted to go to the nightclub on weekends. So she'd leave us with anybody who will watch us – uncle or somebody, cousin-type shit. And that's where we got into a lot of the bad shit that kids aren't supposed to be getting into."

But he's also learning to take accountability for his actions. He's been practising the Serenity Prayer, which he learned in rehab. In his mind, making an album like *Quaranta* – a cathartic release of everything he was going through before getting help with his drug and alcohol problems – is a chance for him to start over.

"It's almost like that was my way of just getting shit out," he says. "I was so fucking caught up in 'Am I going to live tomorrow?' It was almost like, if I died, this is what I have to say. That's where I was at with it. This is all my shit." ®

MUSIC

A star finally finds her voice

Eve Hewson plays a woman who sings to bond with her teenage son in the movie Flora and Son

By ALEX MORRIS

EVE HEWSON will not be doing karaoke today. "I have to be really, really hammered to do karaoke," the actress explains, walking through New York's Central Park. "I would really have to be a whole bottle of tequila deep." Not that she is opposed to such things ("I mean, I *am* Irish"), but it's 10am on a Wednesday, and up until very, very recently, sober public singing – or sober singing of any kind, really – was a complete nonstarter. "Absolutely not," she says. "Hard no. It was my biggest fear."

So she'd played a non-singing nurse in *The Knick*, a non-singing prostitute in *The Luminaries*, and a non-singing murderer in *Bad Sisters*. Then she'd taken a sleeping pill on a flight to London, read the script to *Flora and Son* – about a struggling single mum who finds a guitar and a way to forge a relationship with her teenage son – found it to be a "slam dunk," and decided not to "shit my pants," as she usually does at the thought of playing a chanteuse, but instead to call her agent and make a case for why John Carney, the writer-director of *Once*, should give her the main role: "I said, 'I can give you something that sounds like a real person trying to express themselves, rather than someone who is trained or has a natural gift.' I think it was the sleeping pill. I was kind of like, 'I'm just gonna have to put my big-girl panties on and learn how to fucking sing.'"

Which she did, flying to LA and spending the next few months in musical boot camp, not with her dad – who just so happens to be Paul Hewson, aka Bono – but rather with Eric Vetro. "He does Ariana Grande, Scarlett Johansson, and everyone who sings in a movie," Hewson tells me. "He basically became my therapist." She also brushed up on guitar, courtesy of Yousician. Then she reached out to Carney to ask for the film's songs so that she could start practising them, only to learn that ... there weren't any songs to practise – yet. "I'm like, 'What the fuck? We're supposed to be shooting next week!' And he's like, 'Yeah, yeah, no, we're gonna go to the studio this weekend, and you and I are going to try and come up with something.'"

By this point in the conversation, Hewson and I have found our way over to the track around the Central Park reservoir, which is exactly where she was first seen in a film. "I was sitting right here, with New York in the background," she says of her appearance in a short movie her tutor shot while the family was tagging along with U2's tour, as they did each summer. "I didn't have any lines. I just sat there. But – I don't know – I felt just completely comfortable with the camera." Legend has it that the director of photography was so moved that he cried.

Hewson's parents, Bono and activist Ali Hewson, were less moved, and made it perfectly clear that a career in the arts wasn't recommended for any of their four children. There were the summers on tour, sure, seeing the world and glomming on to the rock-star lifestyle. But the rest of the year was explicitly designed to be a counterpoint to that for the Hewson clan. They went to church on Sundays. She attended her local primary school. When it came to secondary school, Hewson schlepped it on public transport. "There would be the odd fucking teenage dickhead that would sing 'It's a Beautiful Day' at me on the train, and I'd just be like, 'Um, OK.' But Irish people have a really good sense of humour. We take the piss out of each other every five seconds."

"The conversation that's happening right now about privilege? I understand where it's coming from. I take it seriously"

Growing up, Hewson, 32, ran with a "big motley crew" who were often the children of friends her parents met in middle school, before U2 was even the foggiest idea. "There wasn't much going on," she says of their sleepy Dublin suburb. "So we reenacted the Kylie Minogue and Robbie Williams music videos. We'd put a coin in a bowl of flour and try and get it out with our hands behind our back." On Wednesdays, Hewson would get together with a local theatre troupe and perform *Monty Python* scenes. There was a period when "the most fun thing to do" was rent a bunch of movies, watch them on repeat, and then prank call people. Sometimes they would pull numbers from her dad's contact list. Sometimes they would prank call Justin Timberlake.

At 15, Hewson's tutor cast her in a feature film. "And that was the kicker," she says. "That was the moment I was committed." She spent a summer studying at the New York Film Academy. She got accepted into the prestigious Tisch acting programme at NYU. She moved to New York and "would walk up Sixth Avenue in my all-black attire, smoking cigarettes and chugging coffee, reciting my monologues in my head, feeling like a true thespian". When her parents voiced concerns, she pushed back

PHOTOGRAPH BY **Yé Fan**

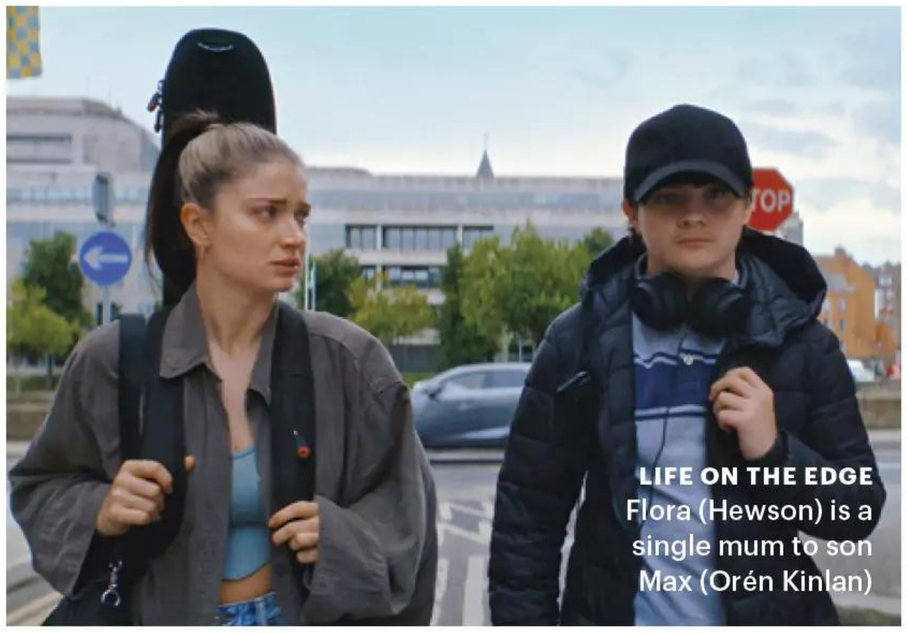
on the pushback. "My dad's dad told him not to sing, so I kind of threw that back in his face," she says.

Then again, there have been times when being who she is, both physically and metaphysically, has been a bit of a mindfuck in an industry known for fucking with minds. "I have grown up with people having an idea of who I am before I've even met them," she says. "Way before I walk into the room, people have decided whether they like me or they don't, and that's a strong thing to consistently have growing up. And it's also hard to talk about because then people are like, 'Oh, she's complaining about her privilege.'"

Which, to be clear, she isn't. She's just trying to explain that, maybe more than the average person, she's had to question every single time whether an offer was "real" or only being offered "because, you know, they wanted the headline of Bono's daughter being in it," she says. When she auditioned for *The Knick*, the casting director submitted just her first name ("like I was Madonna or something"). She doesn't know who told director Steven Soderbergh whose kid she was. "But I think when he found out, he was like, 'OK, I have to meet her,' because obviously he thought I would be some head wreck," she says wryly. "We have bad PR as a collective nepo-baby group. We need a new PR team. It's hard out there for the nepo babies."

It's probably a testament to her solidity – and her Irish penchant for taking the piss – that when *New York* magazine published its nepo-baby cover story last year, Hewson dived headlong into the fray. "Actually pretty devastated I'm not featured in the nepo baby article like haven't they seen my hit show *Bad Sisters*??? The NERVE," she tweeted, after having commented on the article with one single word: "jealous". She was surprised by the overwhelming response to what she had thought was her obviously underwhelming one. "I tweet stupid shit all day long. No one's paid attention," she tells me. "And then all of a sudden it became this huge debate and people were chiming in all these different opinions, and, oh, my God, it was just madness. But it was great promotion for *Bad Sisters*. I mean, the internet is a dark place, but you gotta use these things to your advantage."

Certainly, Hewson is not entitled enough to be confused as to why there should be hubbub around her entitlement. She was in the car with her dad and Bobby Shriver when they came up with the idea for Red, the global force to fight AIDS. She travelled to Cork to meet the orphans arriving from Belarus as part of her mum's work with the Chernobyl Children's Project. When it came to *Flora*, she knew that there would be those who would question her right to play such a hardscrabble character. "Three days before we started shooting, I almost quit," she tells me. "I was sick with anxiety about it. The conversation that's happening right now about privilege? I understand where it's coming from. I take it seriously."



LIFE ON THE EDGE
Flora (Hewson) is a single mum to son Max (Orén Kinlan)

Hewson explains that despite her privilege, she's endured her fair share of harrowing Hollywood experiences, including a #MeToo episode that caused her to almost quit acting. "Honestly, if I get into it, then I have to call my therapist," she says, declining to name the film. Afterwards, she found herself having panic attacks before auditions, and wondering if her body was sabotaging her acting career as a form of self-preservation. A year later, the #MeToo movement happened, bringing with it more interesting roles for women, including Hewson's in *The Luminaries* – "It was similar to what I was going through in my head because she was sort of the object of everyone's desire, and she felt trapped" – and a sense of empowerment that helped her fall in love with acting again. "All of a sudden, people were listening to women. They had access to the media, and social media, and they were able to say, 'This has been my experience. You have to listen to me now.' And that has changed everything on any set. If I have an issue, they better fucking take me seriously. They have to."

If there were any remaining questions about whether Hewson should be taken seriously on her own merits (and there likely weren't), they were put to rest with *Flora*, when the premiere at Sundance received a standing ovation. For her own part, Hewson has come to terms with the fact that her privilege helped jump-start her career, but that it could not possibly be all that has sustained it. "I asked myself a lot of questions, but what I came down to was that I am an actor," she says. "We are playing characters that are unlike ourselves. The actual craft of it is to not know anything about this person's life or their context or their background, and to find a way in to find empathy to then create a true authentic version of that person. I have played prostitutes before. I have played murderers. I have played a man living inside of a woman's body. I've been able to astral project myself and other human beings, you know? I have to just remember what I do."

Plus, it turned out that in some ways, there couldn't have been a better fit for *Flora* than Hewson. The movie's best song is one that she helped write – a skill for which she is more than happy to credit her lineage. "I grew up songwriting," she says, explaining how her dad sometimes had her cut words from a newspaper and use them to create lyrics, Mad Libs-style. "I mean, we were so involved in his work every day. There was music being played, and, 'What do you think of this song? Do you like this verse?' Like, my dad didn't teach me how to ride a bike. He taught me how to write a song." The one she sings with co-star Joseph Gordon-Levitt was written in a Dublin studio in just eight hours and recorded that very night.

Now, with *Flora* set to be released by Apple TV+ in September, Hewson has just returned from Cape Cod, where she's been working on Netflix's murder-mystery series *The Perfect Couple* until production was shut down by WGA picketers ("I mean, look, I get what they're doing"). Next, she'll head to the UK to film *Hedda,* based on Ibsen's play. Immediately after that, she'll film season two of *Bad Sisters*. Her schedule is so packed and peripatetic that, she tells me, while she'd love a boyfriend, the prospect feels logistically impossible. "I did start a Hinge account," says Hewson. "The first person that I got matched with was an 85-year-old man. His name was Malcolm. And he was just looking for an attractive young lady to go on adventures with" – she makes air quotes – "'when safe, of course'."

Speaking of safety, a couple of bikers ride past, and Hewson cocks her head to one side. "You know, I still don't know how to ride a bike," she admits. Then she sees the plotting look on my face and bursts out laughing: "No fucking way." ®

FAST FACTS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?
Hewson is named after her time and date of birth: 7am on 7 July ("Eve is in seven")

BUT THERE'S MORE...
Though she goes by Eve, her birth name is a bit longer: Memphis Eve Sunny Day Iris Hewson

GOODBYE TO A GREAT
Hewson starred as the daughter of James Gandolfini's character in one of his final films, 2013's *Enough Said*

LET'S DUET
At her 21st-birthday party in Las Vegas, parents Bono and Ali serenaded Hewson with Lady Gaga's 'Telephone'

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RS
ON THE
RECORD
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
Pioneer DJ

DJ Yoda talks us through the equipment he's used in his 20 years as a hip-hop DJ, and discusses how mixing and scratching with video as well as audio changed his career

DJ YODA, AKA Londoner Duncan Beiny, broke through as a hip-hop DJ in 2001, when his *How to Cut and Paste Mix Tape Vol. 1* became a cult hit. Its success led to the release of *Vol. 2* the following year and then a series of themed collections under the 'How to Cut and Paste' brand. Over his 20 years in the business, his achievements include winning DMC Scratch DJ of the Year and releasing a number of original artist albums (from 2006's *The Amazing Adventures of DJ Yoda*, featuring Biz Markie and the Jungle Brothers, to last year's *Prom Nite*). More recently, DJ Yoda has moved into film-themed audio-visual DJ sets, from *Stranger Things* to Quentin Tarantino movies.

Both his parents worked in the music industry, his dad as an artist manager and his mum for a music producer, and their records were stored in his bedroom. "I was literally surrounded by vinyl as a kid," he says. "Then the first music I got into that wasn't pop was hip-hop, and I wanted to try and recreate all the scratching and samples, even though I had no idea how. I started off by ruining my parents' hi-fi player just dragging the needle across the record, until I realised I needed to save up and buy turntables."

What has your DJ set-up looked like over the years?

It's always been simple – two turntables, with a laptop to the side in the last 15, 20 years. What changes is the mixer; that's where I keep really up to date with the latest technology. I don't change mixers for the sake of it, but I do when a new feature comes out that adds to what I do, and it happens more or less every year. For instance, this year the new thing is mixers with buttons that allow you to isolate the stems of tracks. You can press a button and just get an a capella immediately, or an instrumental, or just the drums. I don't have any brand loyalty. I go with whoever has the coolest new equipment, but I'd say over half the time it tends to be Pioneer DJ.

Ever been tempted to go digital?

Analogue decks are really important to me, although I've messed around with digital. I've never liked CDJs, but there are now a couple of controllers I'm comfortable DJing with. One of them is the Pioneer DJ REV7, which has rotating platters like a turntable. The very core of what I do in hip-hop DJing, even just aesthetically, is to have two 12-inch platters rotating in front of me; it never feels right to not have that. Then, once you start getting into the technicalities of turntablism, the 12-inch record platter allows you to be more expressive. If you think about just the physics of it, the smaller you make that jog wheel, it swings through a greater amount of sound. Whereas if you've got a larger platter, you can be more expressive with smaller movements.

Any favourite mixers?

A groundbreaking one for me and a lot of people in my world was the Pioneer DJM-909 – that really set the ball rolling for hip-hop or open-format DJs that are interested in skills and quick mixing, doing technical stuff with DJing and effects. They kept the space where the crossfader is nice and clean, because you're always moving your hands over it and you don't want to accidentally press any buttons. The effects were built into the mixer with these paddle switches; they're a really instinctive way to add effects. A lot of battle-style DJ mixers took their cue from that 909, and the one I use now, the Pioneer DJM-S11, is like a modern version of it.

How does your DJ set-up translate to the studio?

I treat my turntables like an instrument, like a piano or a guitar, so if I'm playing them as part of a production, it's the same set-up as when I'm DJing. For the actual album production, more often than not, I use Ableton Live, then it depends on the project from there. The last couple have been built around organic instruments, so I've had cello, harp, bass guitar, recording all these live instruments but treating them like samples, so cutting them up or using them as loops. When I was making mixtapes in my bedroom at home, I did it with just a four-track cassette recorder. In fact, the 'How to Cut and Paste' series was all done with no computer, just a four-track cassette recorder, unmixed and unmastered, really rough. But that's how I like it.

What other evolutions have you seen in your career?

One major jump forward, which really changed my whole music career, was the ability to mix and scratch with video as well as audio. That changed what I do, certainly from a live perspective. I always threw audio samples from movies into my mixes, but once I could manipulate the films themselves, it became a whole new live show. The set-up is the same as when I DJ, but instead of mixing MP3s, I'm mixing MP4s, so essentially scratching and cutting video files. It's a really inspiring way of doing things, which combines my two loves of music and film, and it's constantly evolving. It's a really exciting area. DAVID POLLOCK

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Mission-critical

MAX GUTSU FOR MOAS

In war-torn Ukraine, professional medical staff and well-equipped ambulances are essential for treating injured soldiers. After driving an ambulance a thousand miles to where it's needed, Adam Hay-Nicholls meets the medics saving lives behind the front line

AN AIR-RAID SIREN wails. No one reacts. It's the fourth in two hours. Nothing happened during the first three. Then, suddenly, there is an enormous bang, like the last firework on Guy Fawkes night. I'd been enjoying a barbecue with half a dozen Ukrainian medics; suddenly, everyone ups and sprints to the basement. Sitting on rickety old hospital beds, staring at the peeling beige walls, we wait underground for the all-clear.

I'd entered Ukraine a day and a half earlier. My mission: to deliver a new ambulance from the Polish border to the front line of the Russo-Ukrainian war in the east, a 1,000-mile trip, on behalf of a humanitarian organisation called MOAS. The name is short for Migrant Offshore Aid Station, because it was originally founded to help migrants making perilous journeys across the Med. Its founder, Christopher Catrambone, a 42-year-old maverick American millionaire turned humanitarian disrupter, is now saving lives behind the Ukrainian front line by employing 150 professional Ukrainian medics and providing vital medical equipment including ambulances.

MY JOURNEY BEGINS with a Ryanair flight out of Stansted. As you can't fly to Ukraine anymore, I fly to Rzeszów, the closest airport on the Polish side. After arriving late, I spend the night in the town's superbly named Hotel Ambasadorski. I can hear other guests snoring through the walls, and the curtains glow red from the lights of the go-go bar next door. My fitful sleep is stirred by the buzz of a text, via the encrypted app, Signal:

"All good?"

It is Sergii.

I haven't met Sergii before. I message back to say everything's good. We're on.

Shortly after sunrise, I'm in a taxi making the trip to Medyka, the closest pedestrian border crossing. The cab driver, Robert, points out where I need to go. I give him his 500 zloty, grab my backpack, and trudge past Portakabins where people are selling SIM cards, towards the Polish border control and on through the overgrown no-man's land towards Ukraine. I've been warned to switch off my phone's roaming and location services at this point. Russian intelligence might be tracking foreign numbers, and as well as attacking hospitals, Putin's army has dropped bombs on ambulances. Both of

WAR EFFORT

Previous page: writer Adam Hay-Nicholls (right) and Sergeii Bolshoy. (This page, clockwise from top) A poignant reminder of those who have lost their lives in the conflict; ready for action — the MOAS vehicles are equipped to deal with most emergencies; thumbs up as the writer sets off in the MOAS ambulance

ADAM HAY-NICHOLLS; MAX GUTSU FOR MOAS; JUSTIN MAROZZI

which are war crimes, by the way. I'm not taking any chances.

On the other side of the fence, hundreds – mostly women and children – are queuing to make the journey into Poland. I'm the first person to walk into Ukraine this morning. "Why are you here?" asks the woman at Ukrainian border control. "I'm an ambulance driver," I reply. Passport stamped, I spot a recruiting post for foreign fighters, a handful of taxi drivers touting for business, and a huge wall of a man. He's tattooed, wearing sand-coloured tactical gear bearing the red cross of a medic and a skull badge with the words 'memento mori'. This is Sergii. He's smoking a vape. He calls it his "android dick".

FIGHTING FOR FREEDOM (Above, left to right) People board the Dnipro-Kyiv sleeper; Sergeii (right) with his MOAS colleague Igor Sereda

The ambulance is similarly brawny: a Toyota Land Cruiser with a treatment bay that's almost tall enough to stand up in, massive chunky tyres, bullbars, winch, raised ride height and uprated shock absorbers. Its off-road ability is unmatched: if the Ghostbusters entered the Dakar Rally, this is what Ecto-1 might look like. Inside, it has a sturdy manual stretcher, monitor defibrillator, ventilator, syringe pumps, suction unit, and enough plasters and bandages to go to war. It's a brand-new vehicle, a 4.5L V8 J70-model designed in the 80s. Long since discontinued in the European Union, it is still built largely for the African market where its mighty diesel emissions are acceptable. With all the medical kit included, it cost MOAS's private donors £90,000. They've bought 15 of these, bringing their total number of ambulances to 50.

I take the wheel, with Sergii beside me. The Ukrainian highways are smooth, while the byways are strewn with potholes. The landscape is a blur of corn, potato and sunflower fields. Every hour or so, we come to an intersection with a checkpoint, all sandbags, camo netting and hedgehogs – those big metal Xs designed to stop invading tanks in their tracks. Each time, we smile at the Kalashnikov-wielding gatekeeper and he waves us through. We're making good time, aiming to get to Kyiv in time for tea. After espousing the joys of *Clarkson's Farm*, Sergii takes an anxious call, then tells me his house has just been hit by a Russian drone.

As it turns out, it was debris from a drone, shot out of the sky by Ukrainian air defence. There's no serious damage, but his wife is, understandably, shaken. She's Alena Vinnitskaya, a famous Ukrainian singer and TV presenter. Sergii Bolshoy was born 48 years ago in Moscow. His dad was a Ukrainian military man, and the family moved to Kyiv in 1986 so Sergii senior could help clean up Chernobyl. These 'liquidators' were heroes. He died of cancer, as most did.

'Bolshoy' means 'big', and it's not Sergii's real name. It's a stage name. He's a multi-instrumentalist musician and plays the bass in three different rock bands (check out Mozes Dick), or at least he did before the war. We bond quickly over music. We share a love of The Clash, Led Zeppelin and – in a niche twist – the Fun Lovin' Criminals. Who knew Huey Morgan had a following in Ukraine? I put on U2's *War* album, which seems apt for this road trip, but Sergii's not keen on the chorus of the song 'Surrender'. "No! No surrender!" he says. "Ukraine will never surrender. Fuck Russia."

We arrive on the outskirts of Kyiv, where I have a room booked at a curious Egyptian-themed hotel. Imagine Abu Simbel meets Fawlty Towers. It's actually a floatel sitting on the Dnieper River, which looks for all the world like the Nile. It's a side hustle: the owner's principal business is selling caviar. Nearby, the monumental Motherland statue, which has stood there since 1981 to honour the Soviets, is having its hammer and sickle removed and replaced by the Ukraine trident. Derussification is happening nationwide.

Joining me for dinner is Sergii's MOAS colleague and occasional bandmate Igor Sereda. He is reputedly the best drummer in Ukraine and has epic 90s pics to prove it (check out Green Grey). He certainly has the best beard. An office building a block away from his apartment recently met with a missile: "Kyiv is not so dangerous now, but who knows about tomorrow," he says.

We spend the evening indulging in soup. Hearty borscht, with thinly cut beetroot and sour cream, followed by solyanka – a dish containing all sorts of smoked meats, tomatoes, onions, lemon and parsley, it's goulash on steroids. That, and a shot of vodka, and I'm out like a light.

"No! No surrender! Ukraine will never surrender. Fuck Russia"
– *Sergii Bolshoy*

The next morning, Sergii arrives with another Land Cruiser ambulance, and we drive in a 100mph convoy east; they're ambulances, we won't get a ticket. We have another 500 miles to cover, fuelled by petrol station hotdogs (the Wog Dog, named after a petrol company, is something of a culinary tradition on the road, according to Sergii). These services also sell camo caps and Zelensky-style khaki T-shirts and jackets. You find stuff like this in some US gas stations too, but that's for adolescent-minded cosplay. This is for the real thing.

As we get closer to our destination, the tarmac becomes badly rutted, the result of heavy equipment making its way to the battlefield. We're staying the night at a civilian hospital that's been partly taken over by the military and MOAS medics. I'm withholding the name of the town for security reasons. The houses are cute, with well-kept lawns, flower gardens and picket fences, but it's become like a garrison town.

Most people are in fatigues, and most of the cars have been resprayed green. There are many freshly dug graves in the cemetery.

"The injuries are unlike anything we've seen before" – *Christopher Catrambone*

The night before my arrival, a school here was destroyed by a missile. So, when there's another bang that evening, thoughts turn to the worst. MOAS team leader Alina Bilous later investigates and confirms it was another missile, launched from a Russian S-300, but this one was successfully intercepted. When war was declared, Bilous trained as a paramedic. "I'm happy because I can help, but I'm angry because we have a war in our country," she says. "It kills me, the idea they want to kill everyone, civilians, children, the elderly. Many people have died. It's not OK."

I see the implications of this conflict up close the next day, when I visit one of the country's top hospitals in the city of Dnipro. This hospital only treats the most serious 'red' casualties, and since the war started, 21,000 victims have passed through its doors. I'm told 90 per cent of the injuries are caused by shrapnel. Dr Sergii Ryshenko, the head doctor, tells me they've managed to save 96 per cent. He credits MOAS's professionalism in assisting with that – stabilising the patients 10-20 miles behind the front line, undertaking temporary surgery, and then transporting them to a proper hospital like this one. Sometimes that drive can take up to four hours. Helicopters aren't an option, due to the risk of being shot down. MOAS has been tasked with 80 per cent of Ukraine's red casualties. Astonishingly, they haven't lost a patient yet on their watch. Not one.

Patients remain in ICU for up to three weeks before being transferred to another hospital further west to convalesce. Dr Oleksandr Tolubaiev, Ryshenko's deputy, takes me around a ward. One young soldier, who was brought in a week ago, is hooked up to a dialysis machine to "help with a leg injury". Is his leg going to be all right, I ask? Tolubaiev lifts the bedsheet to reveal the man's left leg has been amputated, sawn off five or six inches above the knee, the stump wrapped in what looks like red gaffer tape.

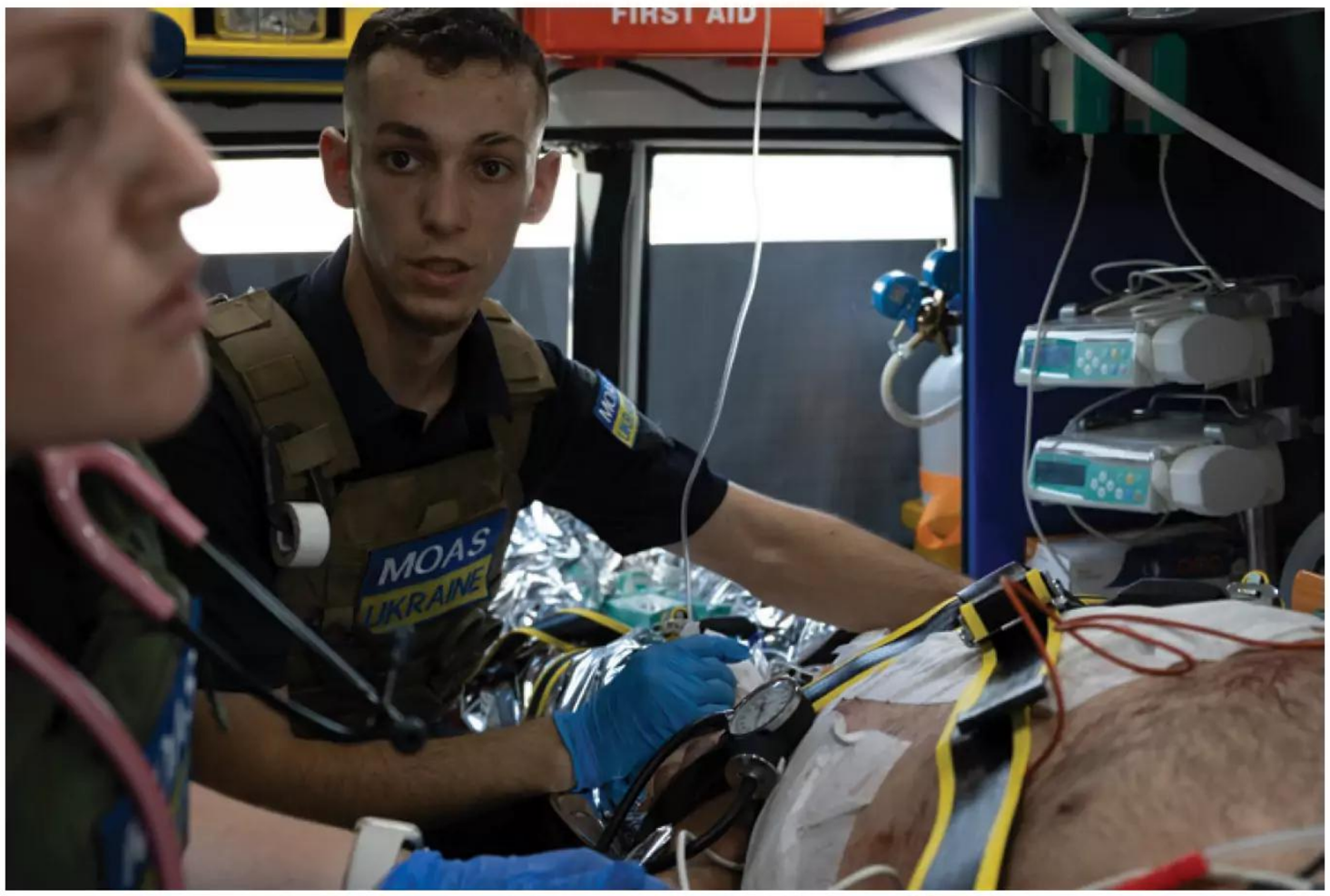
MERCY MISSION (Above, left to right) The writer chats to Chris Catrambone (left); MOAS vehicles fuel up for a long drive ahead

I SIT DOWN with MOAS's founder, the garrulous Catrambone. He's put £790,000 of his own money into this effort, and he's raised an additional £15 million from private donors. It's costing £865,000 a month to run this operation. The staff are all Ukrainian, patriotic and committed; there are no volunteers. Catrambone didn't want adrenalin-junkie war tourists. He pays top dollar to get the best, and his strategy is working.

Since the war started, Catrambone has only been out of Ukraine for four weeks. "You exhaust every effort you can, both in the field and raising money. If you fail, people die. A lot of these humanitarian organisations try to do what they know, replicating it in different places without modifying the process, and it becomes ineffective and a waste of money. For me, it's very simple: where's the problem? Let's go to it and start making the impact. And that, crazily, is disruptive." Most aid outfits are afraid to pick a side in a war, he explains. "At the beginning, people were like: 'We can't help a soldier.' Well, they're the ones dying. You've got to care for human lives, regardless of whether or not they're wearing a uniform. By the time we see them, they're not carrying a gun."

Catrambone made his money insuring US military contractors and providing

ADAM HAY-NICHOLLS; MAX GUTSU FOR MOAS



emergency medical assistance in hostile places. He's used to war zones, but this war is different. "The injuries are unlike anything we've seen before," he says. "This is a major war featuring two sides with modern weaponry. In Iraq and Afghanistan, people were being injured by mortar attacks, IED blasts, suicide bombers. They were quite targeted. Here, it's a different enemy. They're throwing everything they have at each other, and they have similar weaponry and similar mindsets in terms of how they fight."

HEALING HANDS (From top) The writer (far right) with a team of MOAS Ukrainian medics; the MOAS team get straight to work on a casualty

Sergii drives us to another MOAS stabilisation point to the south, very close to the front line and 'hot'. I'm instructed to wear body armour. There's a red casualty incoming and we're racing to meet him. Sergii practically forces a cop car off the road. "Correct, policeman," he mutters. A stooped lady in a headscarf goes to cross the road, then thinks better of it. "Correct, old woman."

The stabilisation point at this location is a requisitioned farmhouse, and the army has just dropped off the soldier. His abdomen has been torn open, a hellish casserole of intestines. Seven big fragments of a mine are removed, and he's patched up and put in the Land Cruiser. We blue-light it to Zaporizhzia, swerving in and out of traffic. Once we get to the hospital and the patient is transferred to theatre, MOAS anaesthetist Dr Inna Demiter signs the paperwork and hands over responsibility. "He'll live," she tells me on the way out. "He may even return to the battlefield in a few months."

That's the tenacious spirit Putin's forces are up against. Putin wants to crush Ukraine's western liberal values, and the curious thing is an hour behind the front line, Ukrainians are just getting on with life. Everything is open. People are drinking on terraces, sunbathing – they're even bungee-jumping off bridges rigged with explosives. The supermarkets stock everything, and the one I visit invites me to wipe my boots on a T-shirt laid at the entrance bearing the Russian president's face. That night, in Dnipro, I enjoy a sensational eel tartare, tender veal filet mignon, and a fine skin-contact Ukrainian chardonnay. We could be in Notting Hill.

Between sleeper trains on my way back to Poland, I explore downtown Kyiv. It is a living war museum. On streets and in squares, you'll find captured or destroyed Russian military hardware, usually with a laminated guide affixed to it explaining what it is and where it was when the Ukrainian army took it off the chess board. A large collection of enemy tanks and surface-to-air missile launchers rust away in Mykhailivska Square, a stone's throw from where there is an ever-growing wall of pictures of the tens of thousands who have been killed since 2014 trying to defend Ukraine from Russian aggression. It started with Crimea and it hasn't stopped. It was only after the February 2022 invasion that western governments took notice and decided to help. MOAS was ahead of them on that, pre-empting the war and getting its logistics lined up a month in advance. But they, and Ukraine, need more support. Countries like the US, UK and Germany are providing weapons, but nowhere near enough aid. Catrambone and his 150 medics are carrying the can. That Land Cruiser I drove over is already saving lives, lots of them, before I even get out of the country. I understand where the indomitable will of its people now comes from – Ukraine is a beautiful country and it must remain free. Sergii is right: there will be no surrender.

Kylie's UK stats speak for themselves: seven number one singles, eight number one albums and 35 top 10 hits over five decades. As new album *Tension* drops, the pop icon is basking in the success of 'Padam Padam' and starting her first-ever residency in Las Vegas. Here she reflects on her creative process and 35-year career, as her star continues to rise

THE BEATING HEART OF POP

By Brittany Spanos

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IT'S A SUNNY afternoon in Los Angeles, but inside a nondescript bar in West Hollywood's Pendry Hotel, a lavish champagne-topped celebration, fit for the late hours of the night, is well underway. For just one day, the space has become a stand-in for the *belle de nuit*-inspired Voltaire nightclub, an intimate venue located in Las Vegas' famed Venetian resort – and it's all for the Australian pop queen Kylie Minogue.

Inside, Minogue is gliding through a room of influencers and journalists and flashing her signature smile. She's about to announce that she'll be Voltaire's inaugural star as she kicks off her first-ever residency this November, though the news feels like Vegas' worst-kept secret: rumours of the pop veteran hitting the Strip have been floating around all summer. Still, Minogue is so excited, she's practically bubbling over like a glass of her namesake prosecco. Vegas had been on her mind for a while, but she wanted to make it happen at just the right moment. Now, with an almost four-decade career and new chart-topping hit, there's no better time.

"I was thinking years ago, I want to do it when I'm younger, not when I'm at the sunset of my career," she explains during a roundtable before the party. Surrounded by ice buckets filled with Kylie-brand wines, the petite pop princess holds court with every single person trying to grab a few minutes of her attention; like true pop royalty, she's chatty and attentive, even recognising a few familiar faces she's encountered before. ("I missed the caviar!" she trills at one point, having been too focused on schmoozing to grab a bite to eat.)

Minogue's Vegas residency has been nearly three years in the making, with talks beginning around the time she released 2020's *Disco*, an album that channelled the spirit of the dance-floor divas of the 70s. The LP arrived smack-dab in the middle of the pandemic, when no one could sweat out her songs at the club like she'd envisioned. However, Minogue found herself on the same wavelength as stars like Dua Lipa and Jessie Ware. The trio of disco revivalists formed a united front as they celebrated the genre, including each other in their livestreamed shows and even in a few collaborations. Minogue's own livestream, the 50-minute *Infinite Disco* sold close to 30,000 tickets.

But no one could have predicted what would happen this summer when Minogue dropped 'Padam Padam', the first single from her forthcoming 16th studio album *Tension*. An onomatopoeic title, meant to capture the sound of a heartbeat, the song became the summer's first pop zeitgeist moment and a global hit, soaring to number one on airplay charts across the globe, including the UK and US. It also arrived just in time for Pride month in June, serving as the unofficial anthem for parades and celebrations around the world. Even Prince William and US Vice President Kamala Harris caught the 'Padam' spirit that month, signalling the exact kind of crossover song that most artists wait their entire lives to enjoy.

"Whenever a song is released, in an instant, it's no longer yours. It takes on its own life," she says. "This one grew up real fast. And it's not slowing down."

For Minogue, this is yet another milestone, taking the already established pop legend to brand-new heights. And 'Padam' is just the beginning of another major Minogue rebirth. One of pop's hardest and most consistent workers, Minogue got back in the studio in 2021 to start *Tension* – another euphoric dance project from the queen of consistently delivering euphoric dance projects.

But like so many great pop icons have often had to endure, it has at times felt like the world is just catching on to Minogue's impact. She has created some of the most timeless pop singles of all time and left an indelible influence on the likes of Lady Gaga, Dua Lipa, Romy and countless other dance-floor doyennes. Now 55, with all signs pointing to her profile continuing to grow bigger still, Minogue is starting to feel the love. "I feel like a lot of good things are coming together at the same time," Minogue tells me later that day, having changed into a sparkly silver top and shiny, black thigh-high boots. She knows that these moments are the type you can never anticipate. She's soaking up every second.

TO KEEP UP in an impossible business, Minogue has become one of its most adaptable stars. That malleability is apparent on the set of Rolling Stone UK's cover shoot: she's instantly game when someone suggests putting her in red wigs, leaning into the reputation she earned in the 90s and 00s as pop's 'great chameleon', when she would switch up her image with each album release. "Sure, let's give it a try," she says. On set, Kylie throws herself into every set-up, knows her angles and manifests her inner pop goddess with every pose. There's a disarmingly curious casualness in Kylie's approach to bringing her music to life that makes pop superstardom seem so... effortless.

And yet, Minogue's career has been marked by challenges since the beginning. As a teen, she had her big break on *Neighbours*, a soap so popular in the 80s that it was watched by a global viewership larger than the size of Australia's population at the time. But when she decided to pursue her musical dreams with her first few singles, her pop identity was deemed too "safe" and "virginal" until she dated INXS' Michael Hutchence. Later, her alternative experimentations were met with mixed reviews from fans and critics alike. "And now as a woman of middle age, there's been challenges in every part of my career," she says. "Pop is supposed to look easy. But as we know, it's a lot of work to [make it] look easy."

That work continued in 2021, when Minogue "crept back into the studio" with some long-time friends and collaborators, like songwriters Richard "Biff" Stannard, Duck Blackwell and Jon Green as well as her trusted A&R Jamie Nelson, whom she's worked with on and off since signing to Parlophone in 1999.

"Initially we were thinking 80s, but it didn't pan out that way," she recalls. "We agreed there's no theme [and that] it'd be refreshing not to have a theme after having done [country-inspired] *Golden* and *Disco*." The rule of thumb during their sessions was to "service the song".

"If the song could stand up on its own and if it bumped up nicely with the other songs, that's the album," she says.

Having to finish *Disco* during lockdown revolutionised how Minogue creates music now. She rarely steps into proper studios anymore to record. Instead, she travels around with a Telefunken microphone set-up so that she can record herself whenever the mood strikes, or a demo comes in.

> "Whenever a song is released, in an instant, it's no longer yours. It takes on its own life. This one grew up real fast. And it's not slowing down"

PREVIOUS SPREAD

KYLIE WEARS COAT BY
ALEXANDRE VAUTHIER COUTURE

THIS PAGE

KYLIE WEARS DRESS BY
JEAN PAUL GAULTIER

"I did so many years and years and years, especially in the early days, of just being really nervous," she says of recording in expensive studios at the start of her career. Those nerves would "inevitably" lead to bouts of tonsillitis or other wrenches being thrown into her plans to record at the reserved spaces.

"Home recording and just being able to play any time is preferable to me," she says. 'Padam Padam' was recorded in a London hotel room, shortly after Nelson sent over the demo. The lead single is one of only a few songs on the album that Minogue herself didn't co-write, but the recording process is where her perfectionism really begins to take over.

"I will drive myself crazy mimicking [the demos]," she explains. "What's so helpful with self-recording is I can spend hours doing that to the point where I go 'Shut it down now.'"

Not long before starting to work on *Tension*, Minogue moved back to Melbourne after three decades living in London, where most of her collaborators have long been. She worked on much of the album from Australia or London hotel rooms when she was in town, but it became clear that she needed a week with her "dream team" of Biff, Blackwell and Green all living and writing in one place. Since Biff doesn't fly, they chose to stay local, finding a "sweltering" Airbnb in Surrey where they holed up together for five days last August as the temperature outside reached 39 degrees Celsius. The house was a godsend: they left with at least 10 new songs.

"You know after you've had a really amazing experience together and it lingers and you need to still reach out to each other because you just had such a great time?" says Minogue, grinning from ear to ear. "We were having breakfast, lunch and dinner together and making music. It was just glorious."

For two of the five days, the quartet were joined by rising songwriters Anya Jones and Camille Purcell (aka Kamille). It was the "female energy" Minogue needed to get out of her comfort zone. She credits Purcell's "chutzpah" in particular for giving her confidence to sing the braggadocio lyrics on 'Tension' where she purrs "*Call me Kylie-ay-ay*."

"She was a household name for me and my family," Purcell says of growing up a Minogue fan. "I think it was just part of my DNA, knowing her name and her music."

Purcell felt pressure to impress one of her heroes, but it didn't take long for her and Minogue to connect. Purcell's two credits on the album were written the same day.

"She's so down-to-earth. You don't even think you're in the room with Kylie. You feel like you're in the room with a friend you've known for a long time. It was such a crazy experience to feel that you know someone so quickly," Purcell says.

Minogue credits working in TV from a young age for instilling a sense of teamwork in her. "I didn't start as anything close to a diva," she says. "I don't know that you get anything extra without being human first."

Purcell continues, "I think she has the power of disarming people straightaway."

"It's not an act," Minogue affirms, "otherwise I would be a very, very good actress to have kept it up for that long."

DISARMING AS SHE may be, Minogue is one of pop's most guarded stars. She is not one to typically sit for hours and do tell-all interviews. Paparazzi rarely catches her outside of events or the rare holiday snapshot. In conversation, she chooses her words carefully, tying every potentially intimate revelation back to her work in a neat and well-practised way.

There are few who know her as intimately as her frequent collaborator Biff. Their friendship stretches back to 1999, but he has considered himself a Minogue fanboy for much longer than that. He was, as he recalls, "a young gay boy" doing the dance routines to 'Better the Devil You Know' and 'Shocked' in clubs in the early 90s; she was a well-established icon for her gay fans long before the entire world would catch up.

Biff took particular notice of the shifts in Minogue's career as the mid-90s hit, and she parted ways with her label PWL and the song-writing trio of Stock Aitken Waterman, who were behind her first four albums. Her sound not only became darker, but also riskier with her in the driver's seat. She even found herself in the studio with the brooding singer-songwriter Nick Cave, an avowed fan of

KYLIE WEARS
COAT BY
ALEXANDRE
VAUTHIER
COUTURE

“It is a huge deal for me to say: ‘I deserve to be here.’ Every artist that’s ever existed was riddled with self-doubt. I thought it might not ever happen for me”

ROLLING STONE

KYLIE WEARS FULL LOOK BY **LRS**, SHOES BY **JEAN PAUL GAULTIER X JIMMY CHOO**

THIS PAGE

KYLIE WEARS DRESS BY
JEAN PAUL GAULTIER

OPPOSITE

KYLIE WEARS COAT BY
ALEXANDRE VAUTHIER COUTURE

Minogue. The trip-hop single 'Confide in Me' and Cave duet 'Where the Wild Roses Grow' had Biff, and many others, taking a serious look at Minogue's own artistry.

Meanwhile, Biff was gaining pop traction as the musical brain behind some of the Spice Girls' biggest hits. As Minogue moved to Parlophone, Nelson connected her with "Biffco", the songwriting team Biff led. When 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' (written and produced by Cathy Dennis with Rob Davis) became her first proper commercial breakthrough in the US market, ushering in a Minogue renaissance around the world, Biff and Kylie would go on to have a massive hit on their hands with 'Love at First Sight', the third release from the 2001 *Fever* album.

"We've got a lifetime of friendship and stories and I don't know how many songs we've done together, if we add up the songs that didn't make it and that did," says Minogue, adding how he brings out a creative freedom that she's needed over the past 24 years. "I find when I write with Biff, I write really instinctively, initially. I feel like I can be expressive and less formulaic in a way. Then we have to make it formulaic."

"Songs come from our conversations as friends, from my life, everyone in the room," Biff explains. "There is a family around her of friendship, love and trust. And it's tight, like a lot of great artists. I'm never gonna mention scenarios or songs, but there's definitely one song on this album that is about something I've been through that she privately knew about that many others wouldn't."

In the comfort of those sessions, with someone who has known her personally and professionally for so long, Minogue is open and honest, but how much she'll let her listeners in past the bubbly pop pixie persona is a negotiation.

"I'm happiest when I feel like I've expressed some deep emotion or thoughts that I'm struggling with and it's like talking with a friend," says Minogue. "Speaking your truth is helpful. When I am able to do that, I like to almost paint it instead of just spilling it out. I like to have some poetry with it to not be entirely obvious."

Minogue became fiercely protective of her personal life at a young age out of necessity; tabloids and paparazzi quickly leeched on to her while she starred in *Neighbours* and even more so as she became an instant pop star with a few big hits under her belt from the start.

"What I think is great for a lot of people now is that there's a discussion about mental health and the toll [fame] can take on people. I had that. I lived that," she says when we speak on a call from her new-ish home in Melbourne. "I was able to manage that myself and with my family and close friends and navigate those waters. It wasn't a decision [to stay private]. It was a reaction to protect myself and to protect my family because they would go through it with you."

What's her secret to keeping much of her life away from the public eye? "It takes common sense. It takes some work, and it takes some sacrifice," she says. "I can really go from doing a full kind of blitz of doing it all and then stop and recalibrate."

While Minogue goes to great efforts to keep her world as private as possible, the snippets that she does reveal point to a life that is ridiculously normal. The larger-than-life diva who transformed into a Grecian goddess surrounded by fountains on her *Aphrodite* tour is more concerned lately about when she should finish watching the last four episodes of *Succession* ("I almost don't want to do it because everyone said the ending is so good. I feel like I've got this delayed gratification"). She considers herself a very good binge-watcher and loves a "little vacay". As she's got older, she's come to appreciate trips where she can just relax and do nothing. "I used to be the adventuring type. It's funny, different stages of life. I'd really kind of scoff and say, 'Why would you want to sit on a beach for a week?' And now I'm thinking, 'A week on a beach would be great.'"

Biff says he and Minogue share a lot of music with one another, like Sigur Rós and some "pretty heavy" dark electronica. The pair would also have regular "Ryan Murphy evenings" where they would watch *Feud* dressed up as either Bette Davis or Joan Crawford.

"I even have a mini Oscar saved in my house still," he says with a laugh.

Minogue herself doesn't account for many other hobbies. She's a bit of a workaholic, having taken few breaks in her career. The longest one she embarked on was when she was getting treatment for breast cancer two decades ago, but even then, she wasn't gone for very long. Her time between most albums is punctuated by long tours, the rare appearance on-screen or work behind-the-scenes on her wine and fragrance companies.

"Sometimes [a long break] crosses my mind," she admits, "but it's fairly fleeting." She's as restlessly curious as she is a perfectionist, wanting to open up a new world and see how she can make it work for her.

"There's a song that hasn't been written yet," she continues. "'Padam Padam' didn't exist a year ago. I guess the ultimate seduction or challenge is to create that three and a half minutes of transformative magic. You want to try and keep getting that high [of] affecting someone positively."

BECAUSE HER WORK never really feels over, it often takes someone like her A&R Nelson to tell her to stop working on a project for her to actually step away. *Tension* isn't even out yet, and Minogue is still considering the endless possibilities of things she could have done more of or differently.

"You've just got to stop at some point," she says. "So, now I'm thinking about what I'll do with the live shows."

Even her downtime in August, before the blitz of more press and promotional shows continues for album release month in September, is booked up. She's planning her live appearance at September's Radio 2 in the Park. And thoughts of Vegas, impending rehearsals and what the hell she's going to put on the setlist are lingering in the back of her mind.

But Minogue is not the type of pop star to buckle under this schedule – she becomes a diamond from this level of pressure.

Still, she's seen firsthand how quickly time can move. Even three decades living in London snuck up on Minogue. For her first five years there, she could barely admit that she had relocated, mostly due to the amount of travel she was doing regularly as her music career was getting established.

"It's been a good point in time for me to be back in Melbourne," she says. She has relished being closer to her parents, siblings and nieces and nephews.

She lives quite close to where she grew up and is not far from her high school when we catch up a few weeks after we met in Los Angeles. The significance of getting to reflect on her 35-year music career so close to where she "became a kind of pop addict" is not lost on her. "I still have my mono radio cassette. That was my portal to the world of music, unless I saved enough money to go buy that album on vinyl. This would not have been my prediction, but it might have been one of my dreams," she reflects.

Looking back, Minogue has no big regrets. Sure, there are small things she wishes could change from albums and performances, the natural nit-picking that comes from being a perfectionist. And there are many times that she wishes she had stood up for herself more. Being thrown into the industry as a teenager meant it took a few years for her to finally build up enough confidence to say "yes or no" to certain things, but even those early albums still feel authentic to who she was at the time. "I would hate to be considered a puppet in the early days. Choices were still made. It's not like someone just operates you," she says.

There's no question Minogue is in full control these days. As we discuss the creative process of the songs on *Tension* one by one, each comes with a detailed story of how every line and note was pieced together by her and her collaborators. Those studio nerves and bouts of stress tonsillitis are long gone. "I now take ages doing everything – because I can," says Minogue casually, confidently.

Decades of making it look easy led to a near-frantic scramble for tickets to her Vegas residency. The first batch sold out quickly, leading to more dates being announced into 2024. She had the type of ticket anxiety that comes with being a legend, which is whether everyone could even get a ticket in the first place.

As she's got older, she's had more moments of soaking in her own impact and legacy. A moment that felt particularly significant in defining that was when she played the Legends Slot at Glastonbury in 2019. It was her first time at the festival, after her 2005 headlining spot was cancelled due to her breast cancer treatment. "[It] is a huge deal for me to say: 'I deserve to be here,'" Minogue says of Glastonbury.

"Every artist that's ever existed was also riddled with insecurity and self-doubt and all of that stuff. But I feel like now it's OK. I chased it. I longed for it for a long time. I thought it just might not ever happen for me. But I think there's enough of it now," says Minogue of her journey. "I don't know that everyone knows the extent of what it's taken for me to keep doing this. That respect is there. It's taken its good old time. I feel a lot more peaceful than I did a while ago. It doesn't change my drive and determination."

Soon Minogue will be moving to another country. Rehearsals for the residency will take place in Las Vegas after *Tension* drops, though Minogue is unsure where on the west coast she'll call home during its run. She previously thought she would live in Los Angeles in 1999, having bought a house after *Impossible Princess* didn't do as well as she and her label had hoped. "I just thought, 'Oh well, maybe that's it,' and I got a place here in West Hollywood. Then I recorded 'Spinning Around' and 'Light Years' and it all took off again. I literally never got to stay here and sold it."

Even though she'll be moving to the States until at least the spring, much of Melbourne is coming with her. Her parents have already bought their tickets to Vegas for opening night; her mum along with a hairdresser who worked on an early film with Minogue in 1989 were the two people on tour with the budding star in the early days.

"They would be hand-washing all the dancers' clothes in the bath of the hotel and rolling them up in towels and drying them overnight," she recalls. "I think of the sacrifices my parents have made and what they've seen me go through. They've seen what I've had to give for this life and career, as amazing and wondrous and incredible [as] it is."

As the keepers of Minogue's most private truths, seeing her parents in the audience may allow Minogue the tiniest moment to lift the veil for the world to see: "I think that's when I'll fall to pieces." ®

> "I think of the sacrifices my parents have made and what they've seen me go through. What I've had to give for this life and career, as amazing as it is"

KYLIE WEARS FULL LOOK BY **LRS**

HAIR BY **SAMI KNIGHT** AT A-FRAME AGENCY USING **ARCTIC FOX**

MAKEUP BY **ANTHONY H NGUYEN** FOR KVD BEAUTY AT THE WALL GROUP

HAIR ASSISTANT **ASHLEY GROSSBLATT**

PRODUCTION **ALEISHA DIGBY** AT WMA

JUST GETTING STARTED

Not content with releasing fourth album *Unfinished Business*, west London rapper Fredo also has a clothing line and his own record label. Here, he discusses how fatherhood ignited his ambition, and announces the imminent arrival of new music from his long-awaited collaboration with Nines

BY SETH PEREIRA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMZY OBR

$10K

CLOTHING
(THROUGHOUT)
FREDO'S OWN

FREDO

WE'RE IN AN age where we are all obsessed with *appearing* busy. Our social media accounts are littered with snapshots that attempt to portray busy-ness, because that's what equals success, right? Rarely do our online identities reflect reality, but Fredo is the exception. He is most certainly as busy as he appears in his online persona. He's a difficult man to pin down, and our proposed interview is spread over three separate meetings. The first is at his Rolling Stone UK photoshoot, where Fredo seems at ease sporting a range of different designer outfits, culminating in a tracksuit he designed himself.

Fashion has always set West London rappers apart from their contemporaries. As any proud citizen from this part of the capital will tell you, Global Sports – the iconic streetwear shop located in Shepherd's Bush Market – was the driving force behind a lot of 90s and early 00s trends. Fredo is no different, attributing his love of style to the aspirational stock he would see on the shop floor. Today, fashion has become a business venture as well as a form of self-expression for him. With prudent investments in high-end clothing and trainer store Kick Game, and a clothing line of his own called PG (short for parental guidance), it's little wonder that Fredo's life embodies the title of his fourth studio album so well.

Unfinished Business is his first release on his own imprint (PG Records), although he insists nothing has changed. "I was independent even when I was signed. All them other albums you heard, bro, I think maybe the label got me one beat; my label has never got me a feature or nothing. I've always been real self-sufficient," he says of his rich discography. The logistical processes may be the same, but Fredo is certainly covering new ground on the album. After his six years in the spotlight, it's refreshing to hear a rapper talking about some of the pitfalls that come with success, rather than delivering empty braggadocio.

Time is now in short supply, and by his own admission Fredo often struggles to balance the music with the businesses and the responsibilities that come with fatherhood. The latter is what motivated him to start broadening his horizons. "Becoming a father put a lot more pressure on me," he says. "I had my daughter in 2020. That's the same time I invested in Kick Game, it's the same time I started designing PG Clothing. So, it was a mad little time, I had to build more – I still gotta build more," Fredo says, clearly in awe of the joy his daughter has brought to his world. In his Rolling Stone UK YouTube video interview, he beams widely as he recounts how her arrival changed his life. And his focus ever since has been on making her life the best it can be.

The ambition is palpable, and even at his most still, during our second (virtual) meeting while he's in transit, Fredo's mind constantly wanders. Like a shark, it's as if pausing for

"People don't understand my life. They think I'm richer than I am, and now I have so many responsibilities, it's hard"

a second would be the death of him; he's constantly thinking about the next milestone, never resting on his laurels. In a relatively short time, Fredo has already reached many, most notably a number one single and a number two album, but diversification is something that Fredo has alluded to throughout his career, frequently referencing quitting rap in his lyrics (there's even a track on the new album entitled 'Quit Rapping'). He's always seemed acutely aware of the ephemeral nature of success in a fickle industry like music. "I feel like there are different reasons why I feel to quit rapping, because I know it's not gonna last forever anyway," he says. "I can't put all my eggs in that basket, and sometimes just the stuff that comes with it can get tiring."

This fatigue would manifest itself as a two-year gap between releases. The first-hand experience of the constantly revolving cycle of life with the birth of his daughter, and the deaths of two close friends in 2020, was enough to give even Fredo pause. "I just needed a break. I just needed to live, bro, and two of my friends had passed away. So, yeah, I just needed a break and to go and enjoy life for a bit," he says, reflecting on a year of emotional upheaval.

Keeping the memory of his friends alive is something that is an enduring part of the music, as are the threats of retaliation for past transgressions. But Fredo really is at his lyrical best when he's exploring the existential crises that inevitably arise when you're faced with the impermanence of life. It's something that has weighed heavy on him ever since his friends passed away. Fredo describes how these events have challenged his world view in unexpected ways. "They make me question religion," he explains. "They make me wonder about heaven and hell and stuff like that. Why does God do the things he does? And where my friends are and shit like that."

These tales of loss and vengeance form the bedrock of *Unfinished Business*. 'To The Max' is a track that best captures Fredo's meditative thoughts on this with lines like "*'Cos nothing now ain't ever last / Except all the chasing, the running and the heavy hearts*". Despite all the success that Fredo has had, it's clear he still longs for the simpler times of yesteryear: "I miss schooldays, when we were all just together, before life started affecting us," he shares. So, although *Unfinished Business* may be devoid of any artistic risks, it's certainly something that will sate the appetite of Fredo fans.

Our first meeting was fleeting, and our second was at the mercy of patchy phone coverage while Fredo was on the motorway from London to Manchester. Our final rendezvous lands us in London's Harrow Road – an area that is integral to Fredo's origin story. His music highlights a different side to the City of Westminster, one that can be rife with gun crime and violence, but also a place with a really strong sense of community, something all of us who grew up in council housing can attest to.

Harrow Road is a neighbourhood that Fredo has consistently paid homage to in his music, and in turn the community treats Fredo with the same reverence. The streets are lined with luxury cars when we meet on a Saturday afternoon, while the usual hustle and bustle of everyday life on Harrow Road is today soundtracked by various cuts of *Unfinished Business* blaring out from speakers. Throngs of loyal followers are outside clamouring for the opportunity to take a picture with their local hero. Inside the chicken shop playing host to Fredo there is a strange calmness, as fans dutifully queue to give Fredo their patronage in exchange for signed CDs, free food and the much-sought-after PG merchandise. Fredo is perched in the corner, clearly comfortable and enjoying the convivial atmosphere where he is surrounded by fans and family alike.

There's a darker side to success, which Fredo points to on various tracks throughout the album, most notably on 'Candlelit Dinners', where he examines how some markers of success have proved hollow and ultimately unfulfilling. The most difficult thing about adjusting to being so visibly successful around people not accustomed to it is that "a lot of people don't understand my life. They think that I'm richer than I am, and now I have so many different responsibilities, it's hard."

He seems a million miles away from these musings as he grabs the mic and heads outside for an impromptu performance of some of his biggest hits in the middle of Harrow Road, blocking off the entire street in the process. Fans encircle the west London star, as he calmly walks into the middle of the road serenading fans and passers-by alike with street classics like 'Change', and his breakout hit 'They Ain't 100'.

Anthems like these, and his penchant for unfiltered storytelling are precisely what has put Fredo in this position. He has carved out a name for himself as one of the scene's premier storytellers, who has released a string of successful tracks without any choruses. Apart from a brief deviation with a now-deleted track, 'Hickory Dickory Dock', his output has very much stuck to the script. Surprisingly, unlike many of his peers, he's not concerned with being considered the greatest; his sole focus is catering for the people that are already tuned in. "I didn't grow up spitting; this is all a blessing and a surprise to me," he says. "So, I'm just grateful for however it comes, so having goals about being the greatest and all of that, I don't care about that, because I'm just grateful that some people even like me."

For someone who has frequently borne the brunt of the evanescence of life, it's curious to learn that Fredo doesn't have more of an interest in legacy either, in creating something that could potentially circumvent the finite constraints of mortality. Instead, he's directed his energy at monetary gain, as this can make a tangible difference to his life and that of those around him who he is now responsible for due to his newfound success. "Legacy is not that important to me; money is important to me. I won't be upset if I don't leave a legacy behind, but I will be upset if I don't have money at the end of this," he says.

The recent success of Dave and Central Cee's joint EP *Split Decision* has reignited conversations about some of the other most sought-after collaboration projects from UK rappers. Rumours of a Fredo and Nines joint mixtape first emerged a number of years ago, but nothing concrete has since materialised. At our last meeting, Fredo not only confirmed the existence of the fabled joint project, but he also revealed that recording is already well under way and that the music will be released soon. "Yeah, this year for sure," he spills. "We started recording it already." It's an exciting revelation, considering Fredo rarely releases newly recorded music – even *Unfinished Business* was mostly recorded at the end of last year. "It's rare that you'll hear a song from me that I've done recently. Proper rare. Even this album, I wrote most of this at the end of last year," he tells me.

A calculated approach to releasing music further cements Fredo's laser-focused business acumen and proves that *Unfinished Business* is more than just an album title, it's a mantra that he lives his life by.

"That's just really how I felt. I feel like I've got unfinished business, you know. I dropped my last album, but it was sort of during the Corona times; I never got to tour. I still got a lot of work to do. I got a lot of unfinished business, whether that's in music, clothing and just in my life in general."

"Having goals about being the greatest, I don't care about that. I'm just grateful that some people like me"

STYLING BY KIERA LIBERATI

“I WANTED TO EXPLORE BLACK MUSIC IN A WAY I’VE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO BEFORE”

From the age of 11, Leigh-Anne Pinnock was telling her schoolmates she was going to be a pop star. Two decades on, you’d be forgiven for thinking she’d long since fulfilled that dream. But, as she tells Rolling Stone UK, she feels she owes it to her younger self to try to live out her “destiny” as a solo artist

By Tara Joshi

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
Mariano Vivanco

FASHION DIRECTION BY
Joseph Kocharian

STYLING BY
Georgia Medley

When Leigh-Anne Pinnock first appeared on our screens for her audition on *The X Factor* in 2011, she was a sweet but shy 19-year-old from High Wycombe with a sweeping side fringe and a job at Pizza Hut.

"I WANT TO BE A POP ICON," she had announced to the nation at the time. But after hearing her sing, judge Kelly Rowland suggested Pinnock would, for now, fare better in a group. Several iterations later, she was placed with fellow singers Jade Thirlwall, Perrie Edwards and Jesy Nelson.

Together they would make pop history. Little Mix were the eventual winners of the series and, over the next decade, would become one of the biggest, most successful British girl bands in the world. On paper, Pinnock had done what she had set out to do. And the 31-year-old has also found happiness in her personal life – she married footballer André Gray in June, after giving birth to their twins in 2021, who she describes as "the most beautiful blessing that I could ever have been blessed with".

Although Pinnock is pleased with her professional achievements so far, she still isn't fully satisfied, as she reveals when we meet. It's a sunny day in east London, and we're sitting on a sofa in her management's offices sipping oat lattes and discussing her decision to launch herself as a solo artist. "I just feel like I haven't quite conquered it yet," she explains, matter-of-factly, "Like, I haven't lived my destiny out yet." The side fringe is long gone – today her hair is slicked back in a high-braid ponytail, and she's dressed simply but elegantly, with delicate gold jewellery glistening on her fingers and earlobes. She exudes warmth and sincerity and holds herself in a way that suggests she is markedly more at ease and confident than when we first saw her on TV. But it is in having grown from that young girl that Pinnock recognises all the things she still wants to do.

At the end of 2021, almost a decade after their debut album was released, Little Mix announced their hiatus. Nelson had left the group in 2020, and the remaining trio felt that it was time to pause, recharge and focus on solo projects. And so, for Pinnock, it was her time. "When I got in the group, that's all I ever saw; I didn't ever see beyond it because I just wanted us to be massive, I wanted us to be huge," she says of those early years. "It wasn't really until we started having those conversations about bringing this to an end where I was like, 'I can do this.' I wasn't ready to not sing. And once upon a time, my dream was to be a solo pop star. I went into something else, and I had the best time of my life, and I don't think I could have done it any other way. But I feel like I owe this to the younger me. I owe her more."

⁘ ⁘ ⁘ ⁘ ⁘

OF JAMAICAN AND BAJAN HERITAGE, Pinnock grew up with parents who were incredibly supportive of her ambition, with her dad driving her to stage school at the weekends. "He really put his time into that for us," she smiles. "He just wanted us to be able to do whatever we wanted to do."

LEIGH-ANNE
WEARS DRESS
BY **MOWALOLA**

"Once upon a time, my **dream** was to be a **solo** pop star. I feel like I owe this to the younger me"

LEIGH-ANNE
WEARS DRESS BY
KAI COLLECTIVE,
SHOES BY **VERSACE**

Maybe this is why Pinnock has always been determined: she had been surrounded by people who encouraged her and told her there were no limits. Though she was shy as a kid and battled with her confidence, she never saw that as something that should hold her back.

As a teenager, Pinnock was obsessed with former *America's Got Talent* winner, Alexis Jordan. "I just loved her, I could see myself in her," she beams. "She was a pop girl who looked like me, and I thought, 'I could do that.'"

Pinnock laughs recalling her transformation at that fateful *X Factor* audition: "I don't know what it was, but I just let loose and for the first time, I just performed. I turned into this different character, almost. I remember my sister saying 'Where did that come from?! I've never seen you like that before!' And I think I just knew that it was my opportunity, this was *the* shot."

As such, the realities of working in music were a blow. During a decade as part of Little Mix, her race meant that Pinnock was in the minority in both the band and most of the industry spaces she was in. "All of a sudden, for a lot of the time, I was one of the only [Black people] in the room, and it was a real shock. But because it was like that for so long, I was conditioned to feeling that way, and I never questioned it, I just got on with it," she says.

British pop music is a notoriously difficult space for Black women, and it is only in the past few years that attention has been drawn to how disproportionately white and male the British music industry – and the pop world, especially – is, particularly at a senior level. In turn, that often impacts how young people of colour are treated in these spaces, with countless stories of artists being dropped by labels because the predominantly white teams just haven't known what to do with them. Even with plenty of examples of singers who have had a few hit singles or a successful album, it is genuinely difficult to think of any Black and British female pop artists (especially darker-skinned women) who have achieved longevity in their music careers.

In her 2021 documentary, *Race, Pop & Power*, Pinnock recounts how American choreographer Frank Gatson Jr. told her on the set of one of Little Mix's early music videos that she was going to have to work five times as hard as the other girls because of her race. At the time, she did not fully understand what he meant. Then Pinnock started noticing the ways in which she was treated differently, be that in terms of how fans engaged with her (or didn't engage at all), or how she was presented in photo shoots and videos to fulfil a certain image of Blackness. "As the time went on, the feeling wasn't right, and I'd be thinking, 'Was that racist?' Just little things I was questioning, but also feeling quite alone with it.

"I wasn't in spaces where I could connect with other Black faces, and I was always on the road, so I didn't get to see my family a lot," she reflects of her time in the band. "So, it did feel quite lonely, and even more lonely because I didn't quite understand it myself." Despite these experiences not being all that long ago, pre-2020 and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, race was not something that people in the music industry were openly talking about. Pinnock felt uncomfortable voicing what she was feeling. "I just pushed it down and down and down. I think that's why I'm still trying to heal from it. It was so weirdly traumatic without even knowing it because I was just getting on with it. I was still smiling, still living my life, but this thing was just there all the time."

"For the first time, I just performed. I turned into this different character, almost. I knew it was *the* shot"

The documentary allowed Pinnock to talk openly about her experiences, and in 2021, she, her husband and her sister, Sairah, set up The Black Fund, which distributes grants and funding to a variety of charities and organisations that work to empower Black people and tackle inequality. "I wanted to put my money where my mouth is," she says affirmatively.

Now, in Pinnock's solo work, her Blackness defiantly takes centre-stage. The team around her is majority Black. "Now I'm on my own, I have the control to make sure 60 per cent of my team is Black, 'cos why not? Music is so heavily influenced by Black culture, so why are all the people at the top white? I can control these little things. I don't have to be the only Black person in the room now, that just doesn't have to be my reality," she says.

She asserts that much of the music she's been working on is a celebration of her Caribbean roots – particularly her long-standing obsession with romantic reggae aka Lovers' Rock, cemented by her cousin in Jamaica burning CDs for her when she was younger. When she decided she wanted to start working on her own material, Pinnock joined a song-writing camp in Jamaica, a country she affectionately describes as her second home. "My grandad lived there, so we used to go to see him every year," she recalls. "It's a part of me, it's my favourite place in the world; it's somewhere I can go and just breathe and be. So, the fact I got to make music there – and make music inspired by my culture – was just an amazing feeling."

Her celebration of her Blackness is not bound to the islands either. Aesthetically, this new era finds Pinnock experimenting with her hair. "Beautiful styles like braids and locs and up-dos, and whatever, hair is a massive thing for me," she says, and this is displayed to full effect in her Rolling Stone UK shoot.

Pinnock also namechecks R&B, house and Afrobeats as inspirations, while mentioning how she grew up listening to rap, reggae, dancehall, jungle and garage. She even hints at a history in High Wycombe's freestyle grime scene: "I guess everyone had little tag names, I feel like I named myself 'Cutie'," she says.

"I think it's interesting how eclectic my upbringing has been in terms of music styles and where I'm gonna go with that," says Pinnock. In a reflection of that, her songwriting team includes Tayla Parx, Khris Riddick-Tynes, Kassa, Abby Keen and Dyo (known respectively for their work with the likes of Ariana Grande, Rick Ross, Stormzy, Normani and Nao). "Musically, I think I just wanted to be able to explore Black music in a way that I've never been able to do in the group before," she says. "It's music that I love, that I love to listen to, and that is *me*. I want to create something that is unique to me."

One of the tracks she's most excited about is her effervescent, euphoric second single, 'My Love'. Featuring Nigerian star Ayra Starr, it pays homage to Pinnock's love of Afrobeats – she's a particularly big fan of Asake, she notes. "I remember messaging my A&R being like, 'We're doing something insane in the studio right now, it's folky with Afrobeats. I don't know what's going on but it's so good!' It just sounded so different – it was the first time I got this feeling that something really incredible was happening. Like, something clicked: 'This is Leigh-Anne.'" Her love of the single was reaffirmed by her kids: "At the minute, the babies are loving 'My Love', and they keep saying 'See mama dancing!' and I have to keep playing the video for them. Honestly, they are obsessed, so that's how I know this is the one, 'cos they just love it so much."

In keeping with Pinnock's desire to help push for change where she can, she specifically tapped local dancers to appear in the 'My Love' video, which was filmed in Nigeria. "It made sense to highlight this beautiful culture," says Pinnock. "I spoke to one of the dancers, and she was saying, 'It's so incredible that you've come here, and we're doing this routine because so much of the Western world likes to take what we are, take it and not come to the source.' And I just think that's infuriating!"

"For a lot of the time, I was one of the only Black people in the room, and it was a real shock. But I never questioned it"

Even her vibrant debut track 'Don't Say Love' is a straight-up pop banger, which nods to sleek UK garage, while its slinky R&B remix is an homage, she says, to the Mariah Carey era of remixes that flipped the tempo of a song into something new. The track, with its message about knowing and loving herself well enough to not let people undervalue or disrespect her, comes in part from what she faced as the only Black girl in Little Mix.

Clearly, Pinnock is done shrinking herself. Fully embracing her identity for the first time in her career, there's a new confidence that's spilling out across an array of genres that feel special – even personal and intimate – to her. She doesn't want young Black women coming through in pop music now to experience what she did, but Pinnock recognises that a lot still has to change. "I had somebody come up to me recently from a band, talking about how they were experiencing something similar to me," she sighs. "It kind of choked me up a bit ... Having someone come up to me now, who has just stepped into the industry and feeling similar things to me.

"I'm pissed off because I don't want the cycle to keep happening. But I felt like, if I'm honest, I didn't really know what to say, because I'm still trying to get my head around it. I want to be that voice and to be able to help..." she pauses. "I mean, with racism in general, I don't know if I'm going to see a change in my lifetime. It's frustrating, but I'm just here doing what I can do."

⁘ ⁘ ⁘ ⁘ ⁘

FOR AN ARTIST WHO HAS BEEN in the limelight for so long, Pinnock is refreshingly candid. Though she's evidently a manicured popstar who is careful with the words she chooses (there are multiple times during our interview where she'll pause and slowly ask herself 'How do I put this?'), and is understandably protective when talking about her children, there are points in our conversation where she tears up recalling how past situations in her relationships – be that in the group, or with her husband – have made her feel about herself. "I am just a very emotional person, and I used to see that as a bad thing, but now I see that as a superpower," she states.

During the song-writing camps that she embarked on for her solo work, Pinnock felt it was important to bring this energy to the table, most notably laying bare her ups and downs, be

that in her relationships with others or with herself, or even just addressing the realities of being a new mother alongside establishing her name as a solo artist. “The one thing I kept saying was that I wanted this to sound like an open letter,” she explains, “because this is the first time I can actually pour my heart out.”

She is conscious that people might see her life on social media and think she has it all sorted. It’s a myth she wants to dispel. “Nothing is perfect,” she reiterates. “A lot of what I’m talking about in the music is past experiences which I would not accept now. And they’re things that me and my husband were able to get through – sometimes you have to go through the shit to come out better on the other side. It is OK to work through things, and not just be like ‘I’m done.’” Though she’s talking specifically about her romantic life, it’s not hard to apply Pinnock’s words to what she has been through more broadly. Later, she notes how her journey has ultimately led to a better place, and “how empowered I now feel as a woman”.

The week before we meet in London, Pinnock is in Greece on a short break with her husband before the promo campaign for ‘My Love’ really kicks in. We have a video call while she’s there, in which we talk mainly about the past: about Little Mix, about her family, but mainly about her younger self. A lot of Pinnock’s time in therapy, she says, is spent talking about herself as a child. “She comes up a lot, I think because of how passionate I was,” she muses, “and I find it interesting if I think about my journey from that girl to now. And how I went from this young girl who had this dream, had this determination, fought so hard to get where she wanted to be, got there, realised that...” she pauses, reaching for the words, before continuing: “Realised that it was going to be a lot harder up there, and lost some of her confidence, lost some of her character. Then has now grown into this woman who has regained that and knows who she is.”

It may have taken years to get here, but that young girl has grown into a woman who is today proudly stepping up and taking ownership of her identity. Embracing her time as a solo artist, Pinnock is ready to celebrate where she’s come from and to work towards a more positive future that is upending the limitations British pop music previously placed on her and other Black women. She is now ready to speak up with honesty wherever she can – and make the songs that she’s always wanted to. “I feel like that little girl would be really proud of this woman that she is now,” she says with a smile. ®

LEIGH-ANNE WEARS DRESS BY **RICK OWENS**

MAKEUP BY **HILA KARMAND** AT ARCH THE AGENCY USING **111SKIN** AND **CTZN COSMETICS**

HAIR BY **ISSAC POLEON** AT CLM AGENCY

HAIR ASSISTANT **MYA MUNTARI**

TROYE SIVAN

one of one

A STAR WAS BORN,
AND A SUPERSTAR EMERGED

By Poppy Reid

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARCUS COOPER

TROYE SIVAN

‘WE MET FOR A DRINK in Melbourne but with the intention of hooking up, basically.”

Troye Sivan is seated at a table at Holloway House in West Hollywood. He’s sipping sparkling mineral water and speaking with such addictive composure about a one-night stand that I find myself leaning forward, right palm on chin, transfixed.

“He was super, super sweet and we had a great time,” Sivan continues. “And then we ended up going to my place and whatever...,” he smiles gently, in a way that’s neither shy nor brazen. “And afterwards, he said to me, ‘Can I sleep over? Is that all right?’ I hadn’t had a sleepover since my ex. And that felt really scary to me. Like very, very intimate.”

Sivan split from his ex Jacob Bixenman in 2019 after four years together. The confusion and grief of that time is tackled in six-song EP, *In A Dream*, which he self-admittedly “word-vomited” out and released in 2020. But lying there, next to this new paramour, Sivan began to reassess all he thought he knew about true intimacy.

“We were lying in bed and he was like, ‘This is one of life’s greatest pleasures, connecting with people in this way.’ Obviously the hook-up is fun, but he’s like, ‘Even if I never see you again, we get to have this really special moment together.’”

He never did see him again, but the experience shifted Sivan’s perspective on relationships. It was the flutter of a butterfly’s wing that ultimately unleashed a creative typhoon.

“That really kick-started everything.”

That encounter is all over the new record, his third and undoubtedly most anticipated opus, *Something to Give Each Other*. The title was inspired by it, so are the songs about his emotional reawakening (‘Honey’), to his nights out on Melbourne dance floors (‘Rush’), to the lyric: *“Boy can I be honest? / Kinda miss using my body”*, from the song ‘Got Me Started’. It’s even in a lyric in the outro of the extended version of ‘Rush’: *“To love with reciprocity is so good.”*

Tomorrow night, Sivan will host an intimate launch party for ‘Rush’ at a dive bar in Silverlake. He’ll play the song once, at midnight, and hide in the bathroom until it’s over. “I don’t like it when I’m at a party and they play my music,” he says in his Australian-South-African accent that he’s maintained since relocating to LA in 2014. “It’s so embarrassing.”

‘Rush’, named after the popular brand of poppers, became Sivan’s highest-charting solo single, accruing 50 million streams in two weeks. Sivan tells Rolling Stone he took a hit for the single’s cover photo to ensure it gave off the same flushed feeling amyl nitrite offers when it’s huffed on the dance floor. Or in the bedroom, as is often the case.

“If you go back there’s this tiny vein on my head,” he smiles. “It’s my favourite part of the picture.”

IF THE COVER artwork didn’t allude to it – a beaming Troye Sivan between the legs of a naked man – his new album era is about liberation. It’s a natural progression from his 2018 album *Bloom*, where the platinum-selling title track about bottoming, and the album itself, explored a delicate vulnerability.

“I’ve always known that I could go back home to Australia and my family would be there. And that’s the best. It makes you invincible to a certain extent”

The 2023 era picks up where *Bloom* left off; it’s confident, hyper-sexualised, and destined for the canon of queer dance-floor anthems. In the same way Janet Jackson’s freshly single era was delivered with exotic warmth on *All For You*, Sivan’s new record sounds rich and fast, and wandering in parts. And therein lies the paradox; it’s made for a certain fandom, but it’s not that. It slips in and out of queerdom and traverses innovative pop territory; a soundtrack for every emotional experience.

PREVIOUS SPREAD

TROYE WEARS JACKET BY **MARNI**

THIS PAGE

TROYE WEARS TOP AND BOTTOMS BY **JW ANDERSON**, BOOTS BY **R13**, JEWELLERY BY **CARTIER**

TROYE WEARS TOP
BY **JW ANDERSON,**
JEWELLERY BY
TIFFANY & CO

TROYE SIVAN

Tracks like 'Can't Go Back Baby' and 'One of Your Girls' (about being a 'straight' man's secret) feel high-brow, subtextual, and new territory for commercial pop. The album sounds as if it's from a remote hometown you can't quite place or recall – perhaps that's due to all the travelling Sivan did while creating the album. Written and recorded in London, LA, Melbourne and Sweden with longtime collaborators including Max Martin protégé Oscar Görres, Styalz Fuego, Ian Kirkpatrick, A.G. Cook, and Leland, the record sounds global and lavish – because it is.

Troye Sivan and Leland (who co-wrote some of Sivan's biggest hits including 'My My My!' and 'Youth') globetrotted for almost a year together. They spent weeks in Stockholm, working at Max Martin's MXN studios with Oscar Görres. The pair would wake in time for breakfast and discuss what they were in the mood for writing about as they ate, and then head to the studio to record it. Later, they would journey to Sydney and Melbourne – riding scooters through the city on the way to the studio – then off they flew to Paris, where they would take inspiration from the museums they would frequent, and later London, and finally LA, where they holed up in Leland's home studio.

Sivan filmed the 'Rush' music video in Berlin. The titillating ode to the club community marks the boldest visual he's ever made – thanks to joyous choreography and a cast of Berlin club scene fixtures. Next up is the clip for 'Got Me Started', which Sivan is filming in Bangkok. His dedication to creating a global-sounding record is all-encompassing; sonically, visually, energetically.

I NOTICE THE NECKLACE he's wearing under his white mesh singlet and blue pinstripe shirt is the same one he wore on the 'Rush' single cover, and the one he wore while starring as Xander on the controversy-ridden TV show, *The Idol*. It's Cartier, he tells me, fingering the two interlocked rings hanging from its chain. "I got my friend Kerri a ring and my friend Kayla a ring, then I wear theirs on my neck."

This article could easily be about 'Troye Sivan the wunderkind actor' not 'Troye Sivan the global pop star'. He's been pursuing an acting career since his early teens when his first manager discovered him on YouTube and put him forward for auditions. Like most of Troye Sivan's young endeavours, his first acting gig was a success. He starred as young Wolverine in the 2009 film *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. He also starred in each of the *Spud* trilogy films alongside John Cleese. But it was his role in Joel Edgerton's *Boy Erased* in 2018, about the harmful effects of so-called 'conversion therapy', that cemented Sivan as an actor's actor.

This year's *The Idol* was Sivan's first swing at television. The show's creators Sam Levinson and Abel Tesfaye (*The Weeknd*) were criticised for the brazen depictions of sex and violence, poor writing and lack of character development. In a media landscape where a strong reaction to art is considered a home run, they would take the win. When I ask Sivan about further accusations of mistreatment towards the cast and crew, he speaks confidently.

"I definitely would like to think I'm a person with strong morals and if I had seen anything where I saw someone being uncomfortable, I would have been the first person to say, 'Hey, that's fucked, we have to stop. It's not OK what's happening.' And I didn't see it.

"I can't speak for Lily [Rose Depp] but I read interviews where she said she felt totally comfortable on set. So for me that is kind of where that conversation ends a little bit – unless there's some bigger picture thing I don't understand, because I'm 'in it' or something. I don't know."

After spending the past two days observing Sivan, it's clear he has a level of insight which escapes most. I saw it in his joyous collaboration at the photoshoot, where our team suggested drawing a monobrow on him for one look and his response was, "Yes, slay." And how here at the restaurant he suggested we move tables to be further away from the speaker so the audio I was capturing would be easier to transcribe.

His sensitive spirit is all over his work. The record's title *Something to Give Each Other* is quite literally the wrapping with which he wants you to receive it: a gift to give someone else. So when he admits he felt unphased by *The Idol*'s controversy, it was surprising. Then I asked him where his resilience comes from.

"It's like nothing matters," he smiles. "Like literally nothing. As far as work and all that goes, I've always known that I could go back home to Australia and my family would be there. And that's the best. It makes you invincible to a certain extent."

IN THE BEGINNING, there was a 12-year-old Troye Sivan and his computer camera in his bedroom in Perth. The same year, Apple released the iPhone, Barack Obama made history as the first Black US President, and California legalised gay marriage. At 17, Troye Sivan uploaded his coming out video, and by 18 he had accrued a following of over four million people.

TROYE SIVAN

Soon he would become one of Australia's biggest music exports, with over 10 billion streams and two (soon to be three) commercially successful albums to his name. He reached a summit of stardom rarely experienced by local acts. What most don't know is that he almost quit music entirely while making platinum-selling debut album, *Blue Neighbourhood*.

"I was like, 'Damn, I wonder if the label made a mistake signing me,'" he tells me the day before, perched on a couch in jeans and a singlet at the cover shoot studio. "I was just like, 'I don't actually know if I'm cut out for this, or any good at this.'"

He told no one. Not his parents, not his manager, not his label; no one.

"I just didn't want to let anyone down or like, you know, have built their hopes up because I had this YouTube audience."

In Sivan's formative career years, YouTube was moving the needle in ways that eclipsed physical sales and digital downloads. Justin Bieber was riding the success of his debut EP after being discovered by Usher and Scooter Braun on YouTube, and Australian A&Rs were discovering the platform's power. EMI Australia's Mark Holland flew to Perth and signed Troye Sivan for the world a decade ago and, despite global distribution agreements, the local label is still considered the control centre of the Troye Sivan Machine.

"I was like, 'Damn, I wonder if the label made a mistake signing me'"

ACROSS THE TWO days we spent together, there was only one moment when Sivan closed up. "I don't want to talk about it too much," he says. When Sivan was building his following on YouTube as a child, not all of his subscribers had good intentions.

Content warning: the next part of this article contains references to the sensitive and distressing topic of online grooming.

One older male fan pretended to be his manager for a time. Another fan, a man believed to be in his sixties, would send Sivan gifts almost every day to a designated PO Box. Often it would be a T-shirt or a CD, or a piece of art, but other times it would be long letters. Sivan was 12 and he kept it from his parents.

"He used to get angry at me if I didn't respond in a timely manner to say thank you," says Sivan. "And I had no idea. I would be like, 'Oh my God, thank you so much.' Like, engaging with him and stuff like that. That's one of the more benign ones."

I ask him about the less benign ones.

"I just had, like, bad people, you know, around when I was a kid."

Stalking?

"Yeah, sometimes."

Physically?

"Sometimes."

"I feel like it's a pretty common experience to have creepy adults online talking to children, you know. I think that's a really common thing."

And even fame doesn't insulate you from the dangers that many young people face online today; in some cases, it heightens the risk of it occurring. An article by Rolling Stone's EJ Dickson noted grooming behaviours are "both common and insidious".

"Which is by design," she wrote. "An adept abuser is skilled at gradually inuring their victim to increasingly inappropriate behaviour, so oftentimes they're not even aware of what's happening to them while it's going on."

EARLIER THIS YEAR, Troye Sivan was based in Melbourne and living with his younger siblings – his sister Sage and his brother Tyde. All three work in music; Sage is a member of indie-pop band Approachable Members of Your Local Community and Tyde is a songwriter and artist in his own right. All three were single at the time.

"The house was just this, like, revolving door," Sivan smiles knowingly. "And my parents were like, obsessed," he jokes. "They're cool, they're chill."

Sivan is candid about his active sex life. He posted a photograph of his daily vitamins in March, with the caption "this combo keeps me gay". One pill was PrEP, the revolutionary medication that prevents the transfer of HIV. But he wasn't always moving around with such comfort in singledom. It took time for him to realise how much he loves his own company. In the past, Sivan would often wake up stressed and would ride the waves of emotions which follow a breakup. Now, he's learned he enjoys travelling solo and taking himself out to dinner.

"When you first go through the breakup,

TROYE WEARS JACKET AND SWEATER BY **MARNI**, SHORTS, STYLIST'S OWN

TROYE WEARS
JEWELLERY BY
TIFFANY & CO

TROYE SIVAN

it feels unfair or shocking that you don't have...," he pauses, "when you realise you're alone in the world. It's just you. And once you get over that shock – that that person doesn't owe you anything. They don't owe you to be with you or to look after you – you realise that you've got to do it yourself. It's hard, but then as soon as you accept that, it's amazing.

"I think out of necessity you surprise yourself. You meet yourself in that moment because damn, I didn't know that I had it in me to go to a party by myself. Or you know, go on a blind date that you've been set up with."

AT THE PHOTOSHOOT, Sivan was wrestling with a sinus infection. "I'm going to blow my nose now otherwise it'll annoy me the whole time," he says, holding his nose and excusing himself.

When he returns from the bathroom, we talk about his use of male pronouns in his lyrics, starting with 2014's 'Gasoline'. I tell him he helped lead the charge for queer representation in music. Sivan, always the cognisant observer, says he "had it easy in the context of the queer experience".

Aware of the privilege he's been afforded simply by when, and where, he was born, Sivan is well known for lending his celebrity to queer causes and charitable elements. His real influence as an activist, however, is less obtrusive. He moves in commercial spaces, on your radio, on billboards, and across your social media timelines – casually inserting queer themes into the public consciousness. A young, white, charming gay man living his best life; singing about boyfriends, anal sex and party drugs. It doesn't so much disrupt, as it does subvert. A private protest on a public stage.

"There's this Jewish idea that the best kind of Tzedakah, which is charity, is Tzedakah that you do quietly. And it's private," he says.

WHEN SIVAN WAS writing his debut album with songwriter/producer and artist Leland, his now longtime collaborator was terrified.

"I come from a really conservative background and a super conservative upbringing. That was such a chapter of growth for me to not give a fuck," Leland says from Sound City Studios in LA. "To write exactly what the song calls for and not be fearful of what some conservative person is going to think of this or me."

Now, thanks to artists like Sivan, Lil Nas X, Sam Smith and Kim Petras, queer representation in music is celebrated in a way that would make forbearers like George Michael, Freddie Mercury and Elton John proud. "I think queer generations after us are going to look back and just see how important Troye's music is and was," says Leland. "And how joyful it is and was. And necessary.

"But for me, it's helped me just give less fucks and to be less fearful in how I move throughout this industry and how I move throughout my career."

"I think queer generations after us are going to look back and just see how important Troye's music is and was" – *LELAND*

TROY SIVAN'S TICKET TO the music industry's inner sanctum is his uniqueness. He takes an inspired approach to music, yet he has no desire to emulate any of pop's luminaries. He's carving his own path based on his individual experience of unabashed experimentation. In some ways – when considering his contribution to LGBTQI+ equality – Sivan's career could have become an avatar of queer iconography. But it's not.

Instead, Sivan is one of one, a young renaissance man whose experiences and resulting music will have a lasting impact on not just pop music, but an entire community who, with each overt celebration of queer culture, is given further permission to live an authentic life.

"I think about a young kid in Australia or in the middle of America. Or whatever. Wherever," he says, unknowingly playing with his hands and pushing back his fingers. "I think about if they see the music videos or hear the music, or hear the stories... If I can make them feel affirmed and seen and recognised – or inspired maybe to go live this happy, free, queer life – then that is something that I'm really proud of. That's something I would really love." ®

CREATIVE DIRECTOR/PRODUCER: KATIE TAYLOR; DOP: CONNOR WYSE
LEAD STYLIST: JARED ELLNER; HAIR STYLIST: CHARLIE LE MINDU; MAKEUP ARTIST: LOFTJET; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANT: NELSON CASTILLO; STYLE ASSISTANT: BROOKE FIGLER; POST EDIT: MARIO ERNUN

Reinventing

As Bombay Bicycle Club gear up to release their sixth album *My Big Day*, the 00s indie heroes look back on their career, collaborating with Damon Albarn and inspiring a new generation of artists

By Nick Reilly

the wheel

Bombay Bicycle Club

‘I think we’ve realised that we are probably the best people to be making our records because no one’s harder on ourselves than we are,” admits Bombay Bicycle Club’s Jack Steadman over lunch.

IT’S A BALMY Tuesday in late July, and Steadman and bandmate Jamie MacColl are sitting in a north London greasy spoon near their rehearsal space. They’re explaining how, for their upcoming sixth album *My Big Day*, they’ve gone it alone.

“I think the amount of effort and work that we put into this is almost like 10 times the last one, just by the fact that it’s us doing it all,” says Steadman.

Not for the first time, the group have ditched mixing-desk twiddlers from the outside world and delivered a record that is entirely their own creation – and it sounds all the better for it. The added work might be daunting for some artists, but you sense that the deep-lying friendships between these north London lads have no doubt helped them see it through.

More than 20 years after they first met as school friends and shared late-night MSN Messenger sessions about their desire to form a band, Bombay Bicycle Club’s close ties have led to them becoming indie royalty.

There’s a legion of first-time fans whose formative teenage moments were soundtracked by their debut *I Had the Blues But I Shook Them Loose*, but as Steadman explains, album collaborators such as Holly Humberstone and Beabadoobee have said they’re proving to be an important voice for Gen Z and beyond too.

“We keep doing this because the band is a tight vehicle, and we’re all pretty open-minded about what the band is. It never has to become boring,” says Steadman.

We’re speaking several months before the album arrives. Is there a heightened sense of anticipation or nerves when you’re sitting on something for a period of time?

Jack: You sometimes have a nervous energy, and you do start to think about whether you should have done things differently. As a songwriter, you can channel that into writing the next record, and I do think that’s why people keep making music.

Jamie: If it was up to me, we’d release it as soon as it’s done! There’s something quite strange about doing a traditional album release. Disclosure released their album recently without a physical part, and there’s something quite liberating about that, but the boring answer is that we wouldn’t want to be a band that doesn’t put out their record physically.

Congratulations on the record, by the way. It’s a lot more laid-back and subtle in places.

Jack: It seems like a combination of all our albums, but the big difference is the amount of people we’ve collaborated with. In this day and age, it’s much more fluid to just ask someone to sing on a song or to deliver a feature, and we found that quite funny.

Damon Albarn, notably, is among those guests.

Jack: Yeah, I’ve known Damon for a really long time. We worked together on the Africa Express project in 2010, and he just kept inviting me back, so we’ve got a good relationship. I recently filled in as creative director for an opera he was doing in Paris. It was a deep and serious opera about France’s dark history in Africa.

That sounds very Damon. I always get the impression that he never stops and is always working on the next musical project, whatever that might be.

Jack: Yeah, we’ll meet him at 9am, and he’ll have already come from another meeting, and his whole day is just filled with the complete opposite to mine. I can barely do one project at a time without feeling overwhelmed. But I respect him for it.

Jamie: His collab was maybe the most challenging to do because Jack did a day of writing with him, but he would be on tour with Gorillaz or making the next Blur record, so he was just writing lyrics in a car between performing at Coachella and then finding a studio to record them in. But he really put the effort in, and we’re very grateful because he’s the kind of guy that could easily move on after a few hours. I think it did mean a lot to him to finish it for us.

What’s the overarching aim of the project and where do you think it takes Bombay’s sound?

Jack: I guess the huge difference and what sets it apart is that we’ve produced it ourselves. When we came back from our hiatus, there was a sense of wanting to ease back into the band by having the help of a producer who could be there to guide us through this.

Jamie: There’s a tendency maybe to rely on producers sometimes and be like, ‘Well, they’re steadying the ship. We don’t need to really focus too much.’ I think the key thing is just having no constraints or boundaries on this. We’re trying to avoid being like ‘Oh, that

> “The amount of effort and work we put into this is like 10 times the last one… it’s us doing it all”
> *– Jack Steadman*

QUAD GOALS:
(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
LEFT): JACK STEADMAN,
SUREN DE SARAM, JAMIE
MACCOLL AND ED NASH

"We keep doing this because the band is a tight vehicle. It never has to become boring"

– Jack Steadman

sounds like a club song or something for Jack's solo work.' I think you can definitely hear that on the record because there's a huge change on it from track to track.

You say you're probably the best people to produce your own records. Does that come from the fact you've been friends for more than 20 years?

Jack: I never really thought about it, but yeah it can't be worse off for it. I think we also just have a great dynamic that we've refined over the last 15 years of me primarily writing the songs, but they're often these unfinished demos and the rest of the guys have this total clarity to be critical of it.

If a band gets together and writes everything together, there can be a lack of objectivity which can lead, in my opinion, to mediocrity sometimes. Instead, Jamie can just sit at home and get sent something, and he'll be able to honestly tell me that it isn't working! I won't take that personally, and I can just try to tweak it.

Jamie: It only works because Jack has a really thick skin!

That friendship must be a huge part of why you're still together after 20 years?

Jamie: It probably is, yeah, but I think we also keep doing it because the band is a tight vehicle, and we're all pretty open-minded about what the band is. It never has to become boring.

There's been a lot of nostalgia recently for mid-00s UK indie, and you were part of it. You're still pushing forward and evolving though, whereas some bands seem rooted in what they were then.

Jack: We do balance it because we're not a band that will just play new songs at a gig because we're not just doing it all for ourselves. We still finish the sets with 'Always Like This', but we know we're there to entertain, and we want to play what people want to hear, even if that means playing a song we've played a million times. Even as a punter I don't want to go to a gig where they just play the new album. I don't want to see that.

Jamie: We're not embarrassed by our past, but we're not constrained by having to service people's nostalgia. I've been thinking about nostalgia a lot recently because for so many of our fans our earlier albums are associated with their lives as teenagers, and that's a very formative part of your life. I think that was annoying for a while, but actually now I think how great it is that we were able to soundtrack those years for people because musically that's a really important thing, and we should be positive about it.

You've got a fresh generation of artists on the record too — Holly Humberstone features on 'Diving'.

Jack: Yes, and she previously messaged us to say that we had influenced her music. It's great to know there's a younger set of artists who grew up listening to us. There's a song co-written with Beabadoobee too. They're brilliant, and for younger musicians like them to say they look up to us is just the greatest thing we can ask for. That means so much more to me than record sales.

Jamie: I think the other thing with nostalgia, and the reason why I think we've been always quite focused on trying something new is that if you're just trying to service it or create something similar over and over, it's just diminishing returns because you can't recreate that. Even if the music's really good, you can't create that feeling that a lot of fans have of discovering something when they're young and the memories that are associated with that.

What does Holly bring to the record?

I think Holly's voice has a wonderful emotional quality to it which felt quite perfect for that song. It's quite accessible but also super emotive at the same time. I learned so much from watching her work – it was just her and her guitarist Jacob writing lyrics on the fly and throwing out ideas. It was amazing how quickly they did it; what she does in a day would take me a month!

You also emerged when Spotify and other streaming services were in their infancy, and there's been a huge amount of change since then.

Jamie: We were definitely online when we started out, but things have changed so much. It's funny because Jack recently discovered his old MSN messenger chats between us and it's just us talking about MySpace and how we can get more fans. I suppose iTunes felt important, but that was more about selling copies of your music.

But as Jack said, streaming does mean that a new generation of fans have been able to discover our music in a way they wouldn't have done 15 years ago. The equivalent for me would have been going through my dad's CD rack!

Finally, the record is called *My Big Day*. How would you spend your ideal 24 hours?

Jamie: I've got an 18-month-old son, so I think it'd be just having the house to myself! He's either really angry or really happy and there's no in between.

Jack: I'd like to wake up at two in the morning and try and get as far away from London as possible but just on buses. That could be fun.

Any unfulfilled ambitions?

Jamie: My ambition is to get absolutely massive in one random country. I don't care what size it is or where it is. I'd like to go somewhere and be treated like royalty and then go home and be actually fine with it! Big in Japan maybe – there's a cliché that never happens. ®

Holly Humberstone's Honest Truth

After opening for Olivia Rodrigo on tour, the singer-songwriter is ready to make her big debut — all while staying grounded in the strength of sisterhood

By **Waiss Aramesh**
Photographs by **Evelyn Freja**

HOLLY HUMBERSTONE is pretty sure her childhood home is haunted.

Sitting in an average-sized hotel room in New York's Gramercy neighbourhood, the 23-year-old songwriter gets excited discussing the home she grew up in, which is 3,000 miles away in Grantham in the UK. "There's this huge basement and just spiders and frogs down there," Humberstone says. "There's this whole grim room in the cellar that has meat hooks and then gutters so all the blood can run."

Humberstone and her three sisters let their imaginations run wild in the old home while their parents stayed busy as NHS doctors. (She thinks the house might have originally been built as servants' quarters for a larger residence.) "It was like our own little universe," Humberstone says. "We'd fuck about and do creative stuff, just mess the house up, do art, do music, play games, create stuff, play outside, scribble on the walls."

These days, Humberstone is busy making a name for herself as one of the most candid new songwriters in pop music. Since summer 2020, she's released two EPs, picked up a Rising Star Award at the 2022 BRITs – a category previously won by artists like Adele, Sam Smith and Florence + the Machine – and toured North America as an opening act on Olivia Rodrigo's *Sour* tour, along with another stint opening for Girl in Red. "There's nothing more inspiring than watching two fucking rock-star young girls every single night for three months," she says.

On her debut album, *Paint My Bedroom Black*, out 13 October, Humberstone builds on the diaristic storytelling from her first couple of EPs and expands her emotional range. As heart-wrenching as her music can be when she sings about expired love, like on 2020's 'Falling Asleep at the Wheel', this album shows some of her best straight-up love songs.

On 'Kissing in Swimming Pools', Humberstone sings, "*Can we kiss in your swimming pool / In this bathing suit, I would die for you / Maybe I don't have to leave so soon / You look heavenly in this shade of blue.*"

Humberstone is currently in a relationship with the person she wrote that song about, though she took some dramatic liberties in the lyrics. "I don't think anybody I know has a swimming pool," she admits. "I guess I properly fell in love, which is really cool."

Other songs, like the moody single 'Antichrist' ("*Am I the Antichrist? / How do I sleep at night?*"), address the guilt she's felt over how certain other relationships have run their course.

"I remember writing that song and it being a little difficult," Humberstone says. "I just didn't have the spare mental energy for it, and I neglected this person that was the best and didn't deserve it."

The last song Humberstone made for *Paint My Bedroom Black* was about missing her oldest sister, Emma, who now lives in Japan and is studying for a master's degree at Tokyo University. On the track 'Elvis Impersonators', she sings, "*I need you next to me, I'm spiralling / I miss your bones, selfishly / I need you next to me, I'm spiralling.*"

As far and wide as her travels have taken her, Humberstone keeps going back to family – and more specifically, sisterhood. The second-youngest of the four sisters, Humberstone says writing about her experiences with them is the most rewarding.

"If I dig down to the core of why I do things, I'm probably just doing it to impress my sisters," says Humberstone, who wrote her very first single, 'Deep End', about one of her sisters' mental health. "Their approval is above everyone's."

During our chat, Humberstone shows off a "17" tattoo on the inside of her left arm – she and her little sister Lucy share a 17 December birthday – and reveals another tattoo that Lucy drew.

"Do you want to see?" Humberstone asks, removing a very large black boot to reveal a small tattoo of a personified strawberry with legs. "Basically, I had a really shit time at uni, and I was really lonely. Lucy would write me little notes, she'd send me postcards... and she would put this little strawberry character on them."

Growing up in the countryside, Humberstone loved the musical *Annie* ("I was fucking entranced"), and she was surrounded by instruments. Her mum played the cello and the piano well – the latter was Humberstone's first instrument – and her dad had loads of violins lying around after becoming obsessed with collecting "hundreds and hundreds of stringed instruments".

Humberstone claims her singing used to be "shit", but she took lessons and started writing music at "maybe seven or eight". Later on, she went to the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts somewhat begrudgingly ("You're going to basically be completely fucked if you don't go to uni," she says sarcastically), but dropped out after a year when she realised she was learning more by actually making music in London.

Once she moved to the city to pursue her career, she struggled to make connections. She wasn't used to being around so many older men (she'd gone to an all-girls high school), and she wasn't used to being alone (her sisters had always been there). Writing sessions were hard before she met her now longtime producer, Rob Milton.

"Writing sessions are so scary," she says. "It's middle-aged man after middle-aged man after middle-aged man that have all written all these amazing songs, and you're just like, 'I've got to fucking prove myself to all these dudes that I have nothing in common with.'"

> ***"I was like, 'I have a message from this girl who's just released the biggest song in the world'"***

Touring with Rodrigo and Girl in Red did Humberstone good. "It was so nice to get to actually spend some time with some other younger females," she says. "I love my whole team, but obviously most teams are just dude-heavy, dude central, do you know what I mean?"

Like many young songwriters, Humberstone acknowledges there can be a trade-off between keeping a personal life personal and speaking her truth in her music. She sees it as an occupational hazard, but the only song she truly regrets is her emotionally intense 2020 single 'Drop Dead'.

"I wrote it when I was really young, and I just don't really relate to it at all anymore," Humberstone says. "If you really listen to the words, it's just like, what the fuck. What is she saying?"

Humberstone's link with Olivia Rodrigo last year almost didn't happen. Rodrigo had direct-messaged Humberstone on Instagram before the release of 'Drivers License' in January 2021, but Humberstone says

she didn't open it until after the song had exploded in popularity.

"I was like, 'I have a message from this girl who's just released the biggest song in the world," Humberstone says.

Looking to jog her memory, Humberstone reaches for her phone and brings up the DM. Rodrigo, still months away from her life changing with the release of *Sour*, is in full fangirl mode: "Hi. I just wanted to say that you are the best thing that ever happened, and I am your biggest fan," the DM to Humberstone reads.

The feeling is mutual these days. "I think she's one of the best writers of our generation. She just writes perfect pop songs, basically, in my opinion," Humberstone says. "Obviously, her stuff changed pop music."

Humberstone is still building on the foundation she got from growing up in a musical family. "I had this loop pedal that my dad had found on eBay or something," Humberstone says, recalling that he gave it to her as a gift before her first tour. "I didn't know how to use it... I'd just stomp and guess the loop timing. It must've sounded shit. I did Wembley Arena with that loop pedal, which is horrendous to think about, but it's fucking hilarious as well."

After her album is released this autumn, Humberstone says she's most excited to come back to America – some parts of it. "I love New York," she says. "I don't know, some of the rest of America is a bit depressing. It will be my first proper tour out here in the States with a band and a bus. I'm just so fucking gassed."

A day before our conversation in New York, Humberstone stepped out in front of a well-attended crowd at a midday Lollapalooza set in Chicago. As she traded an electric guitar for a classical acoustic one and back again throughout the set, a blonde girl in the very first row wept hard, sobbing as Humberstone sang "*And oh my god / I've done it again / I've almost killed a friendship*" during her performance of 'Sleep Tight'. Humberstone noticed.

"She was on a different planet," Humberstone says now. "It's really flattering that she was obviously very moved by it."

As the set continued, Humberstone crooned her debut single, 'Deep End', which came out months before the pandemic forced the world inside. Three years later, the song sounds like a promise she's ready to follow through on. "*Throw me in the deep end*," Humberstone sings. "*I'm ready now to swim*." Ⓡ

Jónsi Birgisson and Georg Hólm from Sigur Rós talk about their first new album for 10 years, the return of keyboardist Kjartan Sveinsson, and vegetarian hot dogs...

The new sonic adventures of Sigur Rós

BY MATT CHARLTON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM DUNK

RULE OF THREE: (FROM LEFT) JÓNSI BIRGISSON, KJARTAN SVEINSSON AND GEORG HÓLM

album, *ÁTTA* (meaning eight in Icelandic). After a surprise digital release in June, the physical format arrived in early September, shortly after our meeting.

It's their first album in 10 years, and a lot has changed in both their world, and the world at large. Perhaps in response to these challenging times, their sound has altered from the sharp, industrial and almost alienating atmosphere of their 2013 album *Kveikur* and returned to a more ethereal, revitalising soundscape, though this was not quite the mood which fed into the album.

"We have gone through a lot – the whole world and the band," Georg Hólm, Sigur Rós' bassist tells me on the morning of their Seattle date. "There was a point in time when we were not sure there would be another record... Not that it was a conscious decision; we just weren't thinking about it. We didn't feel tempted to do more. They were difficult times, we had the wind in our face, battling the elements. We felt a little bit battered, and the record did come as a surprise for us."

The difficult times in question involve not only drummer Orri Páll Dýrason being accused of sexual assault (Dýrason denied the allegations but resigned in 2018 a few days after they were made), but also the Icelandic government accusing the band of evading 151m króna (£840,000) of tax between 2010 and 2014, an incident which Sigur Rós blamed on an accounting error before repaying the debt plus interest. They also faced a second prosecution for the same offence in 2020 and had their assets frozen. This time, the band fought back. "It just felt as if we were being attacked somehow. We felt it was unjust, so we did fight back... we wouldn't have fought back if we hadn't found it unjust, we'd have just admitted it, but it wasn't our fault," says Hólm.

Then there's the general darkness which has engulfed the world in the past 10 years. Yet, in typical Icelandic style, with *ÁTTA*, Sigur Rós have managed to take the bleakness and melancholy and turn it into something celestial and uplifting. "I think this record is very positive, it's like a glimmer of hope for me," says Hólm. "We've always done a little bit of that. There will always be that moment in the music where there's that one note that goes 'Oh yes, that's the one that I'm looking for,' but I think we mastered it on this record."

Birgisson agrees, "It all channels through. It's hard to say when you write songs. You never do anything pre-thought or decided, it just happens, and all this stuff just channels out somehow – unconscious therapy, I guess."

The personnel changes continued with the return of multi-instrumentalist Kjartan Sveinsson to the Sigur Rós fold. His comeback followed in the style of most of this album's germination in that it was relaxed and almost happened by accident. It started pre-Covid, when Sveinsson visited Birgisson in LA. "We set up a small studio in the basement," Birgisson recalls, "I had my guitar with the bow, and we just started playing and getting a few ideas. We hadn't played together for years – it was fun, and things came with no effort and flowed really well."

So there was no pressure because you didn't know it was going to be a Sigur Rós record?

"I think you've hit the nail on the head there," says Hólm. "It was really relaxed, there was no pressure at all, and when we started working on it, we were like 'Let's just see what happens.' That is one of the key rules in the band – if there are rules in a band – that if we enjoy things then we will do them. When we formed, that's what we said to each other: 'We'll do this as long as we enjoy it.' And we're still enjoying it."

I suggest to Hólm that it sounds like the best sort of night out – not making any particular plans, and seeing where the evening takes you. "I guess the start of the record was exactly like that," he replies. "Jónsi and Kjartan realised that they had something there, and then they called me and said that maybe this could be an album, maybe we should call this a Sigur Rós record and start working."

Just as things started to click into place, however, there was the small matter of a pandemic. "Covid came, and we paused for two years, and then afterwards we got back together. After all of that, we wanted to do something pure and beautiful – as cheesy as that sounds," says Birgisson. Then major world events kept happening: the Capitol attack in the US in January 2021 and the culling of women's

WHEN PROMOTING A new album, the lead singer of one of the most successful non-English-speaking bands in the world probably doesn't expect to be asked about hot dogs.

But when it comes to interviewing Sigur Rós, it seems remiss not to ask about Reykjavík's famous hot dogs which have been scoffed by the likes of Bill Clinton and might just be the Icelandic capital's greatest offering – aside from being a hub of musical creativity that spawned Sigur Rós.

"Of course I've had a hot dog, but I've been vegetarian for 23 years now, so a long time ago," comes the response from Sigur Rós frontman Jónsi Birgisson.

"The main hot-dog wagon doesn't have vegetarian hot dogs, which is ridiculous. I always get really angry when I go back there," he adds. I promise him that I'll include this exchange, so the next time he's in Reykjavík, the vendor may have changed their ways. "Yes, please. I'd love that."

Birgisson now lives in LA, having eschewed the inclement Icelandic climate for something warmer. "I think I'm in my sun phase; I'm just like: 'Give me as much sun as I can get, just every day, just fucking shine on my face. Give me some life.'" I put it to him that he might not be in his current line of work if he'd grown up in the sunshine. "Very true. I would probably have moved to Iceland. The grass is always greener..." He is currently in an overcast Seattle "it has a lot in common with Reykjavík", having played a "perfectly rowdy" concert the previous evening to promote the band's new – and quite unexpected – eighth

and LGBTQ+ rights across the country, then Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "When we were mixing, Russia invaded Ukraine, and we were like, 'Oh God. What's going on in this world?!' And also this climate craziness. It was just so much negativity and weirdness that we just wanted to throw *ÁTTA* out there, put it out for people somehow."

In fact, the album was supposed to come out last year, and the physical release was supposed to drop simultaneously alongside the streaming in June. "I guess we started making the album the year before last – it was meant to be out last year, but delays... typical us," Hólm says. "Last year's tour was meant to be the tour for this record. We wanted to release everything at the same time – we wanted to be old school, big release with CD, vinyl, everything online... But we'd had enough of delayed gratification and just wanted to get the record out there."

The album was streaming in time for this leg of the tour, where the three members of the band stand among a 41-piece orchestra – "a sound bath of our own making" as Birgisson puts it – where every lush orchestral whim the band have ever tended towards is fully indulged. The orchestra changes with every venue. "It takes a lot of time for our conductor to whip them into shape early on in the day," says Birgisson. "Three hours' rehearsal then two hours with us – that's why he earns the big bucks!"

With the absence of any real percussion section in the band, however, I ask if there was ever any temptation to bring in a session drummer or to find an outright replacement for Dýrason. "Percussion is something we had to discuss right at the beginning," says Hólm. "We didn't find the answers immediately; we did experiment a lot. Some of the songs wanted to have beats on them, but we ended up taking a lot of it back, and one of the reasons is that we thought, 'There is no drummer in the band, so we should embrace that and let the music flow a bit more freely.'"

It turns out that the lack of a drummer shaped the sound for *ÁTTA*, just as the absence of Sveinsson had shaped their most recent albums, with their lean towards a harsher, more mechanical sound. It was the return of Sveinsson which afforded the new record a lightness and sense of melody. "When Kjartan quit, we changed tactics on how to write songs and did it differently and maybe used more drums than ever. Then when Orri quit, there were no drums, no percussion. I think for this album, we focused on the melodies. It's great to have Kjartan back – he's just a melody maker and a kind of genius," enthuses Birgisson.

With their ghostly, minimalist lyrics, the group have always encouraged their fans to apply their own meaning, feelings and experiences to the music, but this also seems to extend to the band. Whereas Birgisson sees the album as "sparse, spiritual, pure, and kind of beautiful", Hólm has attached an entirely different description to *ÁTTA* because of his own recent struggles.

"I think this record looks within. I know it has this big sound, but for me it has this introspective feel to it – there's no hiding, it's a kind of 'I have found myself, here I am,'" he says. "Maybe it's because at the same time we were working on this record, I was going through lots of things. I stopped drinking; I came to realise I'd become an alcoholic and I had to completely change myself, and had to dig deep within myself, and maybe that's why this record is like that for me in my heart."

There are several opportunities to apply personal interpretation to this album. Not least of these is the striking artwork, a 1983 image by Icelandic artist Rúrí, depicting a burning rainbow flag. "Before we decided on this photo, we were thinking of some kind of climate disaster imagery," says Birgisson. "Then we stumbled on Rúrí, and it's an extremely powerful image – you can interpret that in so many ways. We probably would have been cancelled for it if it weren't for the fact that I'm gay!"

But that is not where the opportunity for interpretation stops. The band invited 10 filmmakers to come to their own visual conclusions, without rules or boundaries, with the result that every track on this album is accompanied by a mini movie. "We did it for *Valtari* in 2012, and it was really fun to hand over the songs, and have people just do whatever they want. We got so much interesting feedback from that, so we just wanted to do it again and see if it worked – it's important to see their take on the music," says Birgisson.

> "A sound bath of our own making" – Birgisson

Hólm agrees, "It's always a thing in the band – people should just experience it themselves. It's really interesting to see what meaning people put into it, and sometimes you wonder how their mind works: 'How did you come up with that?!'"

Stepping into the unknown and embracing uncertainty seems to have become part of Sigur Rós' DNA. The increasingly nebulous and irregular nature of their work, combined with the shape and scale of the band contracting and expanding, make their shows one of the most intimate and personal live experiences around. Not forgetting that they're also a multi-million-selling act.

There is a consistent uncertainty in the future of the band too. "Every album is going to be the last album," says Birgisson. "We were going to call this album *Bless*, which is Icelandic for 'goodbye'. It's kind of a cool word, 'Bless to the world and bless to us and bless to everything.' [It's] really dramatic, but you never know what's going to happen, and it's good not to think about it maybe."

Hólm is more optimistic, however. "This record rejuvenated us and our enthusiasm for the band and making music, and we're already talking about making new music – no promises, though!"

Contrary to the last, and dancing between light and darkness, it seems as if Sigur Rós are not quite done with putting their unique, ethereal spin on melancholy and turmoil. In troubled times, it feels as if their lightness of touch is very much needed in order to break up the gathering clouds and to disperse negative energy... just don't ask Birgisson about Icelandic hotdogs. ®

ON THE FRONT LINE

As the founder and face of news outlet Popular Front, Jake Hanrahan is bringing unfiltered world events to the masses through a social media platform that he believes is challenging established and antiquated media brands. **Miles Ellingham** joined Hanrahan and his team at the Paris riots to see him at work

Into the fray

Jake Hanrahan (left) and his cameraman Luke Pierce near Place de la Nation, Paris, during this year's May Day riots

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Jake Hanrahan is practising muay thai in the corridor between two carriages on the Eurostar.

WE'RE EN ROUTE to Paris where the journalist and frontman of alternative news site Popular Front will be covering the May Day protests. An embattled French people are gearing up to show Macron what they think of his pension reforms. Over the past couple of months, the French police have laid into protesters at these demonstrations. More than 300 people have been left injured, including two in a coma, while others have lost eyes and thumbs. I'm apprehensive. Hanrahan, however, is used to this kind of thing. He almost seems excited.

I hadn't heard of Jake Hanrahan, or his work, until a friend of mine – someone who spends much of their time at free parties and doesn't typically keep abreast of world affairs – suddenly began quizzing me on the geopolitical complexities of the second Nagorno-Karabakh War. "Where did you hear about that?!" I said, taken aback. "Popular Front", he replied, matter-of-factly.

Popular Front, founded by Hanrahan in 2018, is a grassroots media platform covering world conflict. It has a large, dedicated following. The documentaries on its YouTube channel amass millions of views, while its Instagram account, despite being restricted by META for 'breaching recommendations guidelines' (despite multiple inquiries, Hanrahan does not know why), still manages close to half a million followers. There's also a *Popular Front* podcast, a semi-regular zine, and a Discord server complete with its own lively online community.

The name started as PFLCJ (Popular Front for the Liberation of Conflict Journalism), "i.e., liberating it from the old gatekeeper, stiff-broom-up-the-arse type people," Hanrahan once explained to me, "but then I thought, actually, Popular Front works."

Travelling on a shoestring, Popular Front has covered events all over the world, from the failed revolution in Belarus to Russia's anti-Putin underground and the Hong Kong protests. There's a broad appeal to its coverage, galvanised by its punky, DIY approach to news reporting. Whereas traditional media outlets will release straight-faced, rigorously impartial reports from conflict areas, there's a giddy, unrestrained element to a Popular Front documentary, one that turns to the viewer and excitedly asks, "Are you seeing this!?"

Over the past two decades, the media landscape has changed significantly. Often attributed to the advent of the internet, the monopoly held by news conglomerates that wield vast wealth and resources is starting to wane. Central to that shift is journalism becoming less by the book as its sacred codes are opened up to interpretation. Hanrahan, for instance, is suspicious of objectivity as an idealised journalistic credo.

"Total objectivity", he once told me, "would be quite dangerous really because it's a bit psychopathic... I just don't think it's natural and that's why a lot of people have lost faith in reportage, because it has this weird, robotic way of going through the motions... Total impartiality presents a black and white feel to a situation which isn't reality," he stated.

That being said, Popular Front approaches stories in ways you won't see on mainstream news sources. Take their video on Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel – considered the world's largest drug-trafficking organisation – which has now hit two million views on YouTube. Comprised of found footage from a cartel footsoldier hiding out in the rainforest, besieged by flesh-eating bugs, the documentary shows the quotidian grimness of life on the frontlines of the drug war. The video is a testament to the level of access Popular Front has obtained and was so successful with their Mexican audience that it spawned an offshoot Instagram account, Popular Front Mexico, which is managed by an associate in Tijuana.

The platform retains something of a cult following but has also attracted wider celebrity attention. A producer claiming to work with American filmmaker Darren Aronofsky reached out to Popular Front in 2021 looking to collaborate. British pop star turned actress Lily Allen has posted about Popular Front, and last year, one of the platform's Ukraine updates found its way onto Kim Kardashian's Insta Stories and was beamed to her 280 million-plus followers. Last year, *Complex* magazine called Hanrahan "one of the most important voices in war and conflict reporting".

Needless to say, the operation has surpassed expectations.

I MET HANRAHAN FOR the first time at King's College, London, where he had been invited to give a lecture. Typically, journalism lectures are dry and under-attended. Hanrahan's was so rammed, I had to sit on the floor. I also felt distinctly older than everyone else although I'm only 27.

"This is what I tell people", Hanrahan said, typically bellicose, addressing a question about how online politics affects the frontlines, "everyone crying on the internet... no one on the ground cares about that. You think people who are getting shelled care about the ideologies of the guy saving them? No one who is fighting cares what you think. Nor should they."

Hanrahan is hard to pin down politically. He's 33, proud of his Irish roots, avowedly anti-authoritarian and has a tattoo of the Levellers (the 17th-century radicals, not the post-punk group) on his right calf. He's closely enmeshed with European anti-fascism but distrusts high-minded theory and millennial left-wing media, because he says it alienates the kind of people he grew up with. Hanrahan hails from Kettering, a working-class area of the East Midlands known for its cobblers. He wants his journalism to be accessible to his friends back home.

A good example of Hanrahan's affection for political outliers is Popular Front's profile of JStark1809, the nefarious founder of a 3D-printed weapons network. Popular Front went to Germany to visit JStark in 2020,

Down to earth

Hanrahan in his modest east London office

producing the documentary *Plastic Defence*, which has now been viewed almost three million times. Multiple investigations into 3D-printed guns have since been published by major newspapers.

"I was talking to him for about three years," Hanrahan said, describing how JStark kept stalling the film, desperate to perfect his homemade FGC-9, a 3D-printable, semi-automatic pistol calibre carbine. FGC, Hanrahan explained, stands for Fuck Gun Control. The following year, German police raided the Völklingen home of JStark, who turned out to be a 28-year-old man, originally from Hannover.

Just a couple of days after the raid, JStark was found dead (reportedly due to natural causes) in a car in front of his parents' Hannover home. His legacy, however, continues in the form of his beloved FGC-9, which has been spotted in the hands of rebel forces in Myanmar. Irish dissident republicans have also been seen with an FGC-9 variant. Following his death, Popular Front's 'about us' page was updated to include a memorial for him.

"The people who make 3D printed guns opened Pandora's box. But you said, 'Hey everyone, Pandora's box is open!'" says a young student challenging Hanrahan during the talk. "You guys did more for 3D printing with insurgencies than anyone else and it's still early days... When something terrible happens, are you going to feel a bit responsible?"

"We're journalists, not police," Hanrahan responded. "We didn't show anyone how to make the gun. We didn't show anyone where to get the gun... It's like saying: 'Don't report on ISIS, because people might join them.'"

Other than his commitment to combat sports (Hanrahan is built like a bull mastiff and attends his local gym with the steadfast dedication of an orthodox priest practising mysteria), the most impressive thing about Popular Front's founder is his industriousness. It's genuinely arresting how many plates he's able to juggle. When he's not playing *World of Warcraft* as his level 58 dwarf Nestor, he edits all of Popular Front's films, administers a seemingly autonomous Discord server, sub-edits every article, plans every trip, and scripts and presents every podcast. He finances everything too through funding from Popular Front's 2,500 Patreon subscribers and various merch endeavours. He is the closest thing Popular Front has to a full-time employee.

Not a fan of normal jobs, Hanrahan once told me about a spell working for TK Maxx in his early twenties. "I would detest every millisecond. I would want to fucking die," he said. To stave off 'the dread', he took to stuffing *Fight Club*-esque threatening letters into expensive Kurt Geiger shoes before stacking them.

Still living in Northampton, his break came

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when he travelled down to London for a meeting at alternative current affairs channel VICE. His grandmother had to lend him the money for the fare, and to his dismay, he arrived to find the manager had forgotten about their appointment. Nevertheless, Hanrahan stuck around in the foyer until he returned at the end of the day. "They asked me what my day rate was. I said £100." One month later, Hanrahan was presenting his own documentary in Sweden.

In the years that followed, VICE News changed Hanrahan's life. The channel sent him to report on the war in Syria just a few months after he quit his job on a building site. During one excursion into the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava, he was arrested by Turkish forces and locked up in a prison. He was released just before the Chechen ISIS conscripts in the next cell could stab him to death.

But over the years, Hanrahan became disillusioned at VICE UK. After leaving the company, he began Popular Front, initially as a podcast.

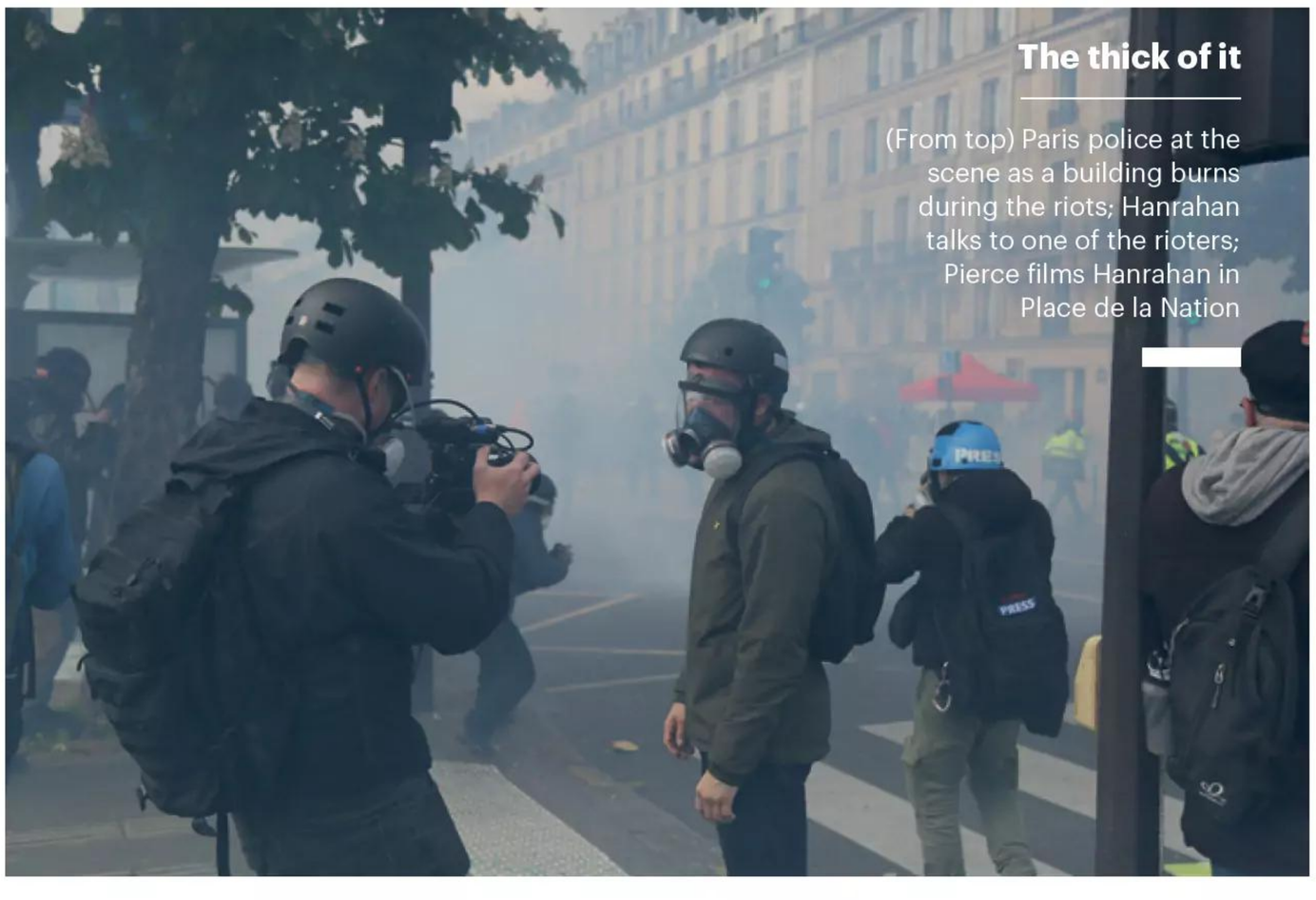
Hanrahan attributes Popular Front's overall vibe to the old BBC travelogue *Whicker's World*, Death Grips, and *CKY2K* (a progenitor of *Jackass*). "Young people are tired of being told when to be angry," says Hanrahan. "If you just present something as it is, the young generation don't feel like you're talking down to them. The media want to be seen as this wise man, this moral arbiter. I really don't think that's what reporting is there for. Reporting is there to tell you what's happening."

Which brings us back to 1 May and Paris.

IT'S A SUNNY afternoon and the city of love is white with tear gas, which, for the uninitiated, feels a bit like attempting a Vicks-style inhalation over a bowl of Szechuan pepper and molten plastic. Protesters clash with police. Shop windows are ruptured and broken open. Rented electric bikes are set on fire in the road. Sound grenades echo like thunder-claps.

When I finally catch up with Hanrahan, he's busily looking for interviewees in the chaos. There are journalists everywhere, but Hanrahan is set apart as the only one with his outlet crudely scrawled on his helmet. Out of nowhere, he's hit with a rubber bullet, and beneath his jacket, a bruise grows in two concentric red circles. He's in good spirits. He and his long-time Popular Front colleague Luke Pierce make sure I'm keeping up, and that the masks and goggles they recommended for me and my photographer are holding up under the strain.

"It's a very unusual situation," Hanrahan shouts to me, muffled behind his gas mask, pointing to interrupted moments of



The thick of it

(From top) Paris police at the scene as a building burns during the riots; Hanrahan talks to one of the rioters; Pierce films Hanrahan in Place de la Nation

Access all areas

Popular Front's reputation means that it can get access to those who might shun mainstream news reporters. Here, Hanrahan interviews some of the anarchists in Paris

everyday life. "There's a pharmacy, a café, and there's booted-up policemen fighting with teenagers".

I ask him how this protest compares to others he's been to. "On a scale of one to 10", he says, "with 10 being the most gnarly – probably a seven." Then, one of the police's crowd-control grenades goes off next to us, slamming into my hand. "Nah, actually," he says, "maybe, like, a six."

Suddenly, the gas returns, drowning the air. Pierce grabs hold of Hanrahan, who grabs hold of me, and we make our way through the smoke in a human chain. It's all strangely tender.

I ask Hanrahan if he'd miss this sort of thing if he could never go back. "I don't think so," he says. "I don't yearn for it... but once I'm in there, I'm like, 'Oh yeah, this is what we do'... I feel like this is my place. I'm good at this, I know what I'm doing."

Eventually, everything starts to feel normal, almost like a game. The ebb and flow of police charges and retreats becomes like a grownup version of British Bulldog or Forty Forty. Then, on the other side of Place de la Nation, an entire building bursts into flames and a column of brown smoke rises over Paris. Suddenly, it doesn't feel like a game anymore.

Having lost and found one another a dozen times, Hanrahan, Pierce, the photographer, and I collapse on a bench outside a café. We're drinking Coca-Cola while a wall of police attempt to divert traffic. We're joined by CocoBongo666, a Popular Front photographer. CocoBongo was in Bakhmut, Ukraine, until the last possible moment, but even *he* looks tired. Soon, Hanrahan, Pierce and CocoBongo are cheerfully recounting past clashes and discussing whether to go for a drink.

Though the finished product reporting the day's events will no doubt retain the racy Popular Front aesthetic, Hanrahan's approach doesn't seem particularly different from that of the other journalists here: he carefully selects his subjects and is always anxious not to miss crucial developments. The main departure is who's willing to talk to Popular Front, which enjoys unhindered access to the black-bloc anarchists at the sharp end of the fray.

OVER THE COUPLE of months that I've got to know Hanrahan and his colleagues, I've become torn between two competing visions of the conflict journalist – neither of which is necessarily specific to Popular Front. The first is of someone willing to take risks for the good of their work, who wants to speak plainly and honestly about the world at its worst. The other hinges on addiction and a perverse need to be close to danger while remaining just far enough removed so that it can never

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Brothers in arms

(From left) Pierce, Hanrahan and Popular Front photographer CocoBongo

quite follow you home. Given that Popular Front is a media organisation with very little oversight, which is operating without set regulations, this second vision seems like a more pertinent critique, though I decide not to put it to Hanrahan in Paris. Instead, a few weeks later, in Popular Front's office – a room Hanrahan rents above a dry-cleaner's in East London – we sit down for a chat.

"You want anything to drink?" he asks, rooting around in a mini fridge. "We've got Pepsi Max, and... err... Pepsi Max."

We decide on Pepsi Max. I've been nervous to challenge Hanrahan; he can be quite defensive sometimes, but today he seems more relaxed, and since Paris it feels as if there's a newfound trust between us.

First, I ask him why he's always in front of the camera – could it be said that his personality obscures the news itself? "There's got to be some level of para-social relationship there..." he replies. "It's like when I got shot with the rubber bullet in Paris. The next day, I was on Twitter and posted about the wound. It was like PR... I thought, people are going to watch the documentary more now. They'll say 'That's the guy that got shot'... So, in a way, it's kinda crass, but there's a part of it that's cynical."

I'm surprised to hear him speak so candidly about the trade-off between sustaining an injury and cultivating viral kudos. "I think you'd be a fool not to do that," he says. "You're an independent. You're running uphill already."

With online status comes online detractors. Hanrahan has had very credible death threats from neo-Nazis, but what seems to affect him more are the chiding accusations online – mostly that he's a 'tourist' or something called a 'conflict bro', which I'd never heard of. One rogue Reddit thread called him out as the 'Joe Rogan of conflict journalism', referring to the American podcasting megastar, whose name is regularly used as shorthand for a hypermasculine person who doesn't know what they're talking about. Another Twitter account labelled him a de facto 'parasite' for Popular Front's assumed exploitation of fixers. Though that same account subsequently apologised publicly.

"I think the idea is that we're not as intellectually sound," says Hanrahan. "We're a bit boisterous and a bit louty – which I am – and purposefully in your face. So that made me 'a bro'. But to be honest, I think it's kind of a classist thing, the idea of 'the bro' as this uneducated guy. I wear Nike-TNs, so I'm a 'conflict bro' – how about I'm a fucking war reporter and I'm doing good work?"

Class wasn't something Hanrahan used to think about until he moved to London and started working at VICE. Another journalist called him 'Danny Dyer' and it got to him. "After that, I was really trying to talk posh on camera," he says of the incident. Pretty soon, he decided to drop the act. "I just thought, 'Fuck this, I'm not doing this anymore. I'm gonna be myself' and that's when a lot more people got into my work."

One of the defining factors of Popular Front is its singular dedication to covering conflict and violence. Hanrahan has always harboured a fascination with violence but, according to him, so has society.

"Everyone is slyly obsessed with violence... I don't see any difference between a football hooligan and a wine mum getting her rocks off watching true crime... It's that stepping over the line. That's why I cover crime and conflict. I'm interested in people who step over the line. Violence is part of that. You can chat shit to someone, but when they punch you in your face everything changes."

There is, of course, a difference between covering conflict and revelling in it, and perhaps the divide is more porous than we'd like to admit. In covering conflict with the aesthetic bombast of a Death Grips video, has Popular Front slipped towards mindless fetishism? When does the fascination with violence and conflict become perverse? "It's kind of always perverse to a degree," Hanrahan concurs. "There's a reason people stop their car when someone gets mown down. It's because they're fascinated."

"But Popular Front aren't doing that, are they?" I question, "You're not just gawping at violence?" We've been here for almost two hours now. The sun has set over the high street outside.

"No," Hanrahan replies. "But we're definitely using part of that fascination to present it... I utilise it to get the point across... But I would also say we're delivering a realistic perspective. The level of violence at the clash we were at in Paris was insane. Why wouldn't we show how bad it was?"

As we part ways, I reflect on the 'conflict bro' label Hanrahan has since adopted. Popular Front is purposely provocative, but it's also approachable and anti-elitist. People respond to what Hanrahan does. I saw it myself in Paris when onlookers would see him coming and shout "Front Populaire! Welcome to France!" According to Hanrahan, Popular Front has now become a touchstone in some war studies syllabuses. But equally, it's also regularly watched by his Thai-boxing friends back in Northampton. He's proud of this duality.

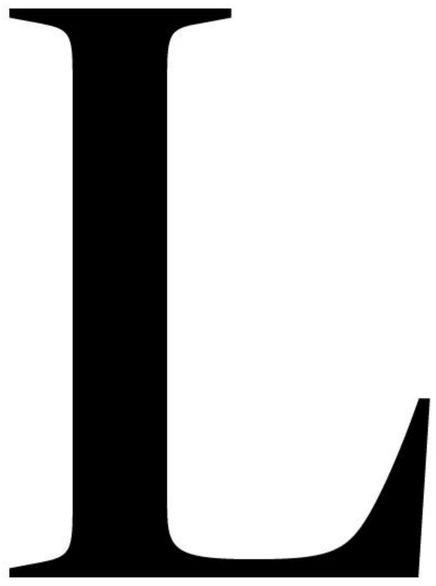
Back at home, beside my bed, is a little tear gas cylinder I brought back from Paris as a souvenir. "If riots were boring and shit, people wouldn't do them," Hanrahan had told me. He's right, I suppose. And if Popular Front was boring and shit, no one would watch it. ®

INTO *the* ABYSS *with* ETHEL CAIN

One of the most intriguing rising artists in pop found her freedom by inventing dark, twisted stories – and she's got lots more to come

BY JULYSSA LOPEZ

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEDDA AFSARI



Lately, for Hayden Silas Anhedönia, time feels like a slippery concept. If she's not playing shows halfway across the world, she's usually tucked away in her bedroom, a quiet hideaway in Pittsburgh with a sloped roof that doubles as a portal to another world.

Here, the hours glide by, one after the other. She might spend 12, 13, even 14 hours trapped inside, leaning over her computer, lost in the expansive sounds she's creating. "You'll get up at 9am to start working, and then you're like, 'Oh, what time is it?' It's 4am the next day," she says. "But it's fun – and insane and frustrating, and it makes me want to rip my hair out."

Getting into this private lair, where Anhedönia, 25, has lived since last autumn, feels a little bit like navigating an M.C. Escher lithograph. From the outside, her house looks lean and narrow, but inside, staircases jut out of unexpected corners, rising higher and higher. Vintage heirlooms and random odds and ends are strewn about; there's an entire wooden church pulpit she found, rustic little trunks plucked from charity shops, a life-size cutout of Susan Sarandon. She's created different versions of this home as she's moved through different locales – a small house in Alabama last year, a former church in Indiana before that – each taking on the haunted, magical quality of antique emporiums filled with esoteric artifacts. People tend to be fascinated by Anhedönia's things, and she likes showing them off: all these sundry bits of the life she's built while breaking through as Ethel Cain, one of the most intriguing pop artists of the past couple of years.

Anhedönia has been getting more acquainted with Ethel Cain, the character whose story she's been tracing across multiple projects since 2018, and whose background she plans to explore further on an EP planned for later this year. Listeners first got to know the full, tragic arc she had in mind on her 2022 debut album, *Preacher's Daughter* – a stunning release that showed Anhedönia's atmospheric production and her knack for Southern Gothic imagery and intense themes, like religious indoctrination, sexual violence, isolation and family trauma.

Ethel Cain is a work of fiction, one that first came to Anhedönia on 'A House in Nebraska', a spine-tingling song she wrote at age 19. Ethel and her creator share a lot in common. Both are women who took off on their own, leaving their oppressive Christian communities: Ethel grew up in Alabama, while Anhedönia herself came from a rural town in Florida called Perry, where she was home-schooled and brought up Baptist. But Anhedönia takes Ethel into much darker terrain from there on *Preacher's Daughter*, having the character grapple with abuse at the hands of her father as she treks out west, where she encounters drugs, sex work, and dangerous men – until eventually she's kidnapped, killed and cannibalised.

It's a violent, fatalist plot told over dazed pianos and dramatic blasts of distortion, Anhedönia's voice often steady and dreamlike even at cruel turns. She drew from inspirations like Lana Del Rey and Florence + the Machine as she crafted her debut, and the album feels like a twisted collage of those influences playing over a feverish Donald Ray Pollock novel – he's one of her favourite writers, along with others in the American Southern Gothic canon. The EP she's working on now covers Ethel's high school years. Anhedönia says she envisions it as another chapter to a longer story she's been telling: "I feel like this is truly laying Ethel Cain to rest."

One Saturday afternoon in June, she takes a few hours off from wrapping up Ethel's story and steps outside, barefaced and relaxed, to Double Wide Grill, a diner built inside a vintage gas station. I see her before she enters the restaurant: from across the street, she fits right into the industrial town she moved into last October, casual in black cargo pants and an oversize crop top with a wolf on it. It's a little different from her aesthetic as Ethel, which is often distinguished by frilly white Edwardian dresses, or the high fashion she's shown off in runway shows for Eckhaus Latta, Miu Miu and Givenchy. And yet, it makes sense, given Anhedönia's ever-changing style. "If I had to describe it in a silly way, I would say there's three people living in my body," she jokes. "There's a punk-ass 16-year-old boy who lives with his grandma, the grandma that he lives with, and then the demon that lives in their basement."

She's catching up after touring a lot this summer, having just knocked out several dates in Australia shortly after making her Coachella debut. Her sets are heavy with emotion; fans sometimes leave in tears, feeling intimately connected to the wrenching isolation at the heart of her songs. On social media, they call her Mother and talk about the closeness they feel with her, in an echo of her own origin story. Growing up in Florida, she recalls sneaking onto the internet behind her parents' backs, before eventually discovering Tumblr communities that changed her life and developing the internet fluency that has made her a cult figure.

But part of her appeal is that she doesn't seem all that interested in stardom. She'd prefer to spend time hidden away making things; all those shows take a lot out of her. A few weeks before we hang out, she made headlines for collapsing onstage at the Sydney Opera House. "I don't like performing," she confesses plainly. "Maybe someday, if I can figure out a way that I can perform that is better for me, but the standard setup of, 'Go out, be in front of a bunch of people' – I don't like to be in front of a bunch of people. I don't like to be the centre of attention 100 per cent."

As her fame expanded, Anhedönia found herself in an obsessive scrolling cycle, checking social media constantly to see what people were saying. She recently decided to leave the internet behind for a while. "I just

PRODUCED BY MICHAEL ZUMAYA; HAIR BY LISA-MARIE POWELL USING R+CO BLEU; MAKEUP BY BLAKE ARMSTRONG USING MAC COSMETICS

> *It's so hard when you try to represent the South. There's so much straight-up depravity and human insanity, but there's also really beautiful parts*

deleted all my Twitter accounts, deactivated even my personal Instagram," she says. "I gave my password to my main Instagram to my manager. I said, 'Don't give this back to me.' It's an addiction. It's literally like alcohol or drugs."

Instead, she's been diving into books, revisiting the dark plots of Flannery O'Connor and Gillian Flynn. (She happened to be reading Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* the day that he passed away this summer.) And to keep her hands busy, she's been embroidering, a hobby that's kept her from getting more tattoos, which already cover her hands and forehead. She has the names of Ashmedai and Gabriel, a demon and archangel from the Bible, written in Hebrew along either side of her hairline, and the word "please" etched on her neck. That one happened during a drunk, high night alone one Tuesday, sketched out in front of a mirror. "I remember the head space I was in; it was very kind of pleading, almost," she says. "Also, I thought, 'My mother, as appalled as she will be that I have a neck tattoo, will love that I have my manners in clear, full view of everyone.'"

But mostly, when she's not reading, embroidering, or on the road, she's making music. "I almost resent touring sometimes," she says. "I'm like, 'Let me go home. I need to sink into my hole.' Let it come to me, and then create." That's why after a while, when we're done picking at our fries, Anhedönia guides me through a few sunbaked Pittsburgh streets and leads me up to her room. We sit on her floor, where she plays some of her intricate new songs. There's one that starts with a diaphanous piano melody and then dives into a crash of guitars. Another one is more than 20 minutes long.

Later, she shows me a playlist that's been guiding her through the music. It's filled with ambient masterminds – Brian Eno, Explosions in the Sky, Grouper and William Basinski, the composer known for his *Disintegration Loops* series, made up of decaying tapes he found and let slowly crumble. Anhedönia, too, has been plunging into her own songs, chasing inspirations before they disappear.

ANHEDÖNIA IS one of those rare people who can access crisp, sharp memories from her early childhood, recalling senses and images as far back as when she was two. "I remember swinging on the tyre swing at my mimi and pop's house," she says. "I remember just lots of time outdoors. I remember there was a very specific way that it feels to listen to a streetlight hum – those old, I guess, fluorescent ones – and the way that they look glowing through the leaves of an oak tree... I remember the way it felt to stand in a dank shed and smell that powdery dirt that's in Florida. Just the way that it felt to be a child and try to make sense of things." Imagery from those days still trickles into her lyrics, often painting an ominous but vivid picture of the South. "It's so hard when you try to represent the South because there's so much just straight-up depravity and kind of human insanity, but there's also really beautiful parts," she says, sounding not unlike O'Connor herself.

Her father was a deacon at the Baptist church in their community; her mother, a convert, took her newfound religion very seriously, she says. Anhedönia remembers how she and her three siblings would gather at the kitchen table every morning for lessons from their mother. During their free time, they weren't allowed to listen to secular music. Instead, she grew up singing in church, absorbing choir music and playing piano.

There was one part of secular culture that Anhedönia recalls being allowed to explore: horror movies, which she watched at her grandparents' house. "I was really anxious and scared of everything. And so my pop, in all his wisdom, decided I should come spend the night and watch every R-rated horror movie that he had." They'd go to Walmart and buy a Betty Crocker cake with strawberry icing to eat while they watched *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Ring*, or the *Final Destination* series. "He was like, 'Watch this, you won't be scared anymore,'" Anhedönia says.

> *When you are trans, you are living a very specific experience not many other people have ... It has shaped the way that I am in certain ways, but it's not everything*

But slowly, real-world uncertainties began to set in. Anhedönia says she'd always understood, somewhere deep inside of her, that she felt an attraction to both sexes. "I had crushes on girls, I had crushes on boys," she says. "And I didn't even really know what that meant." Her neighbourhood was small and full of old ladies, as she describes it, and she'd noticed that people treated one of her neighbours, a gay man who lived in town, differently. "I started to get this inkling in my head at some point as I was approaching adolescence, like, 'Is that not allowed?'" So when she was about 11 years old, she turned to her parents with an innocent query. "I thought I was just going to be like, 'Hey ... I have a question.'" This is often painted as Anhedönia's coming-out story, but the truth is, she was just a kid asking about something she didn't fully understand. "I was like, 'I think I like boys.'"

In a community obsessed with upholding puritanical ideals they believed would keep the devil at bay, all hell broke loose, she says. Families from her church would tell her mom that Anhedönia couldn't play with their kids. Her parents sent her to therapy. Her life grew even lonelier and darker, cascading into several years that she now says she hardly remembers – in between home-school lessons, she spent most of her time in bed with the curtains drawn. "Living in that environment, you just want to get out of it," she says. "I remember just kind of locking away parts of myself and thinking, 'You're going to wake up, you're going to eat, you're going to deal with whatever happens today, you're going to go to sleep, and then you're going to keep doing that until this is over.'"

At 16, she started taking classes at a community college, then went to school to become a nail technician at 18. By then, she'd flown out the door and started living on her own in Tallahassee, indulging in her new freedom. She experimented with acid, opioids, Xanax, meth once. "When you come from such an oppressive upbringing, you tend to spiral for a moment," she admits. It was right around then that the idea of Ethel Cain began blossoming in her mind.

She found other answers, too. "It wasn't until I was nearing adulthood when I discovered what being trans was, through Tumblr of all places," she recalls. "I didn't even know you could do that. I didn't know that was a thing." Up until then, her church had told her she was gay. The actual identity she came to understand for herself "wasn't even in the conversation in any way," she continues. "Wrong letter."

Anhedönia is careful when she talks about being trans, emphasising that her gender identity is only one fact in a complex personality. "When you are trans, you are living a very specific experience that not many other people in the world have," she says. "I wanted to not be known as a trans artist, I think, not because I didn't want people to know I was trans, or because I didn't want to be proud of that fact, but... It has shaped the way that I am in certain ways, but it's not everything."

She shared the news with her sister when she was 20, posted about it on Facebook, and simply told her mother she was starting hormone therapy. It was a more straightforward conversation than the one she'd had at age 11, and she was met with far more support. Even now, Anhedönia is cautious about revealing her past, aware that people conflate the darkness of her fiction with her real life. She's also protective of her family, who she's in a much better place with: all of them have left the church at this point, though several are still religious in their own ways.

"I always toe the line of not wanting to dredge it up," she says. "But I get so caught up in the fantasy and the fun of making a story that I forget that there are real-world reasons that I do what I do."

When Anhedönia began uploading her music online, she connected with the likes of singer-songwriter Nicole Dollanganger, known for nightmarish-dream pop, and Lil Aaron, a rapper who also grew up in a deeply Christian family. She opened for Dollanganger and gained followers with songs like the gossamer-light 'Bruises'. Then Lil Aaron introduced her to some people at a publishing company called Prescription Songs. It was the middle of the pandemic, and she says she'd just lost her job doing nails in Tallahassee. The company offered her a deal, and Anhedönia took it – connecting her on paper to Prescription Songs' owner, Dr. Luke, the producer Kesha accused of rape, psychological torment, and emotional abuse in a lawsuit she filed in 2014. (He vehemently denied her claims and countersued for defamation; Kesha's cases were all dropped or dismissed, and this June, after a decade-long court battle, they reached a settlement in which Kesha said that "only God knows what happened that night.")

Anhedönia knew who Dr. Luke was, but says she wasn't aware of the allegations against him when she first signed. "I didn't do a lot of digging until way further down the line," she says. Once she knew, she continues, "I just decided, 'I'm here now and can't really go anywhere for a while. So I'm just going to mind my business and make my music.' But if I had my choice, I would much prefer to do business with somebody else. I'll just say that."

The Prescription Songs deal came during a desperate time for her. "I was broke," she says. "I was literally going to the hospital because I was malnourished, and I was passing out all the time. My landlord was sending me angry texts every day because I was behind on rent. I was like, 'I need money,' and I signed."

She emphasises that she's been in charge of the creative process for everything she's released through Prescription. (Dr. Luke isn't credited on any of her songs.) For now, she's focused on finishing the next few releases she needs to fulfil her contract. "We're almost out," she says. "But yeah, if I could go back in time and do it differently, I probably wouldn't put my name on that paper."

There's a sense in which it's hard to imagine Anhedönia being contained by any music-business paperwork, because of just how expansive her imagination is, and just how much she wants to do. Before Ethel Cain came to her, she'd been sketching out three characters: Teddy, an androgynous altar boy with a vigilante streak; Salem, a woodsy witch with long white hair; and Carter, a time-traveller with a portal in his basement. Then Ethel Cain came along. "I knew it was going to be music, but I was like, 'Can I write a story? Can I make a film? I want to draw this,'" she says. "I'm so obsessed with this story. I want to tell it in a million different ways."

Later this year, she plans to leave Pittsburgh. She's chasing brutal winters to match the tone of her next full-length album, which she describes as dark and cold. It'll focus on the story behind Ethel's mother and see her grappling with her daughter's death. The one after that will dive into Ethel's grandmother.

There are other characters lurking in her head – but she still thinks she has a lot of time to spend with the Cain women, and a long time before she reaches the end of the story. "This is going to be 15, 20 years from now," she says. "I work very slow. That's how I like it." ®

By Isabelia Herrera

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOMEN & VAN DE VELDE
STYLING BY NICOLA FORMICHETTI
DESIGN BY BRIAN ROETTINGER

KAROL G

BET ON HERSELF AND WON

ON THE LAST day of June, about 15,000 fans have braved dense New York City smog to worship at the altar of Karol G. At Rockefeller Center, a massive crowd assembles for the superstar's debut on the *Today* show, dressed in Colombian *levanta-cola* (butt-lifting) jeans and the lemon-yellow jerseys of Los Cafeteros, the country's national soccer team. There's even a little girl sporting a black crop top emblazoned with Karol's moniker, "Bichota".

Inside 30 Rock, the green room feels like an extended-family function: a dozen or so managers, assistants and makeup artists are talking over one another, swarming around Karol and cracking jokes as they touch up her look for soundcheck. It is 5am, and most of us have slept only three hours, but Karol, 32, is bright and animated, possessing an enviable bubbliness, the kind that only someone who is accustomed to waking at these hours has. Outside, I'd overheard a fan say that La Bichota is probably still asleep. When I recount this information to Karol, she just laughs. "I didn't sleep at all!" she exclaims in her *cantaíto paisa* accent, a smile across her face.

Karol's aunt, whom she briefly lived with as a teen, has come all the way from Long Island to support her niece – wearing a T-shirt decorated with the artwork from Karol's recent album, *Mañana Será Bonito*, of course. She bought Colombian empanadas from a bakery in Hempstead for Karol's team, but is surprised that there isn't anywhere to warm them up ("You can't eat cold empanadas!" she gripes, the *tía* (aunt) energy reaching *Guinness World Records* levels).

After a quick soundcheck, Karol returns to the green room to change into her costume: a white maxi skirt, a long-sleeve mauve crop top and thigh-high hot-pink platform boots. A tiny braid and a collection of silver charms frame her heart-shaped face, while a heavy cross, bejewelled with magenta gemstones, clings to her neck. Backstage, the head of security walks over and says that there are so many people outside that the NYPD has called for backup; apparently, some fans who didn't make it into the plaza are stuck on Fifth Avenue, trying to rush the stage.

All morning, rumours have circulated that Karol has surpassed the attendance number that Harry Styles set when he performed on *Today* last summer. As the morning unfolds, the speculation seems like it could turn into fact: *Today* staff members believe she's eclipsed not just Styles, but also what they think is the show's all-time attendance record, set by Ricky Martin in 1999. At one point, Al Roker emerges from a random door in a baby-blue pinstripe suit: "It hasn't been this crazy since Ricky Martin!" he squawks.

It is almost *too* on-the-nose that Karol might have broken the attendance record of an artist who laid the groundwork for her own ascent into the mainstream. Along with heavyweights like Bad Bunny and J Balvin, Karol is part of a new generation of Latin American and US-born Latinx artists infiltrating the American pop market and rewriting age-old scripts about language barriers and marketing practices. Too often, their commercial achievements have relied on feel-good narratives of cultural affirmation that excise the racial, linguistic and geographical specificities of Latinx experiences, reifying the notion that we are all one people. At the same time, Karol's ability to set a new record challenges a xenophobic fiction the Anglo music industry has perpetuated for too long: the lie that Spanish-language music is niche, unpopular and unknown.

Since she released her first album six years ago, Karol has endeared millions of listeners across the globe with the cool, crowd-pleasing fluidity of her songs. Her music glides through ripples of reggaeton, Afrobeats, dancehall and trap, and with sunny, radio-friendly melodies, she sings universal stories of heartache, betrayal and triumph. Her songs feel equally suited for moonlit beachfront *perreos* as they are for glitzy club outings – and coming from a woman, they offer a brief respite from the male perspectives on conquest and sex that monopolise reggaeton. That recipe has fuelled a whirlwind year for Karol, catapulting her to a new level of fame over the past few months. In March, *Mañana Será Bonito* became the first Spanish-language album by a woman to hit number one on the US *Billboard* 200, and it's currently the highest-selling Latin album released this year. This summer, one of her tracks was featured on the *Barbie* soundtrack. She became the first Latina to headline Lollapalooza, and recently launched a massive stadium tour through the US.

In August, she unveiled the companion album to *Mañana Será Bonito* – a personal manifesto called *Mañana Será Bonito (Bichota Season)*. Karol is still processing all the milestones. "I imagined that I was going to accomplish a lot of things in my life, but really, I never imagined it'd be to the point that it is today. To reach so many people, touch so many people in so many different aspects – it still blows my mind," she says. "Life has shown me that so many things are possible. I have 10 times more ambition and vision than what I imagined."

After an hour or so, Karol finally emerges from the green room. She exits backstage and walks into the marbled lobby of 30 Rock, where she'll enter the plaza through a pair of golden double doors. Her team clusters around her in a circle to shelter her from passers-by snapping photos, and for a moment, she turns around and hides her face into a wall where no one can see her. Out of nowhere, her aunt slides up next to me and murmurs, "If I'm her aunt and I'm nervous, imagine what she must be feeling!"

Eventually, Karol turns around, high-fives everyone in her crew, and steps out into the crowd.

"YOU CAN PUT ON THE SADDEST SONGS IN THE WORLD, AND IT'S AS IF YOU WERE KILLING YOURSELF, BUT REALLY, YOU'RE HEALING."

KAROL G IS RUNNING ON CONFIDENCE these days, and after spending five minutes with her, you *will* be charmed. She might win you over with how she giddily stamps her feet and squeals "¡*Que chimba*!" (Colombian slang for "That's awesome!") when she's excited about a new song, which has already occurred at least three times. Maybe she'll delight you after she whispers a joke about an overly thirsty fan into your ear. She might enchant you when, after singing a line from *Bichota Season*, she laughs off the male fragility of a former lover. Or perhaps she'll do it with her overwhelmingly good manners. I mean, not every celebrity offers to order you room service because you didn't have time to eat lunch.

That charisma is on full display the day before her *Today* show appearance. Karol answers the door of her suite at the luxe Hotel Barrière Fouquet's New York, appearing in a white terry-cloth robe with her hair damp from the shower. Her baby-pink locks are the latest curatorial choice in a rotating, rainbow-hued colour wheel that's included electric blue and cherry red during her past two album cycles.

Inside the suite, dusty rosewood panels line the walls, and a matching velvet couch flanks a massive vanity mirror, where Karol's makeup artists surround her. Suitcases packed with eyeshadow palettes, blow-dryers and clothes cover the floor like jigsaw chunks, but I find a spot on the sofa and plop down while Karol changes into a sleeveless pink hoodie and acid-wash army-green cargo pants. Her luggage is plastered with stickers of the cutesy cartoons that appear on the cover of *Mañana Será Bonito*; a stuffed toy of the redheaded mermaid from the album artwork perches on a chair in the corner.

Karol is taking it easy after spending four hours posing for her official Madame Tussauds

PRODUCTION BY RHIANNA RULE; PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES; 3D TYPEFACE BY TOM COBEN; HAIR BY JOERI ROUFFA FOR THE WALL GROUP; MAKEUP BY ALEXANDRA FRENCH FOR FORWARD ARTISTS; NAILS BY EMI KUDO FOR A-FRAME AGENCY; TAILORING BY HUGO; PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY LAURA BERROU AND JJ GEIGER; STYLING ASSISTANCE BY RAUL MAGDALENO AND JORDAN SHAFFER; PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE BY DOUG STUCKEY AND MIKEY DE VERA; PHOTOGRAPHED AT SMASHBOX STUDIOS

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
SILVER JACKET
AND TROUSERS BY
BUERLANGMA, SILVER
TOP BY **GIUSEPPE DI
MORABITO**

THIS SPREAD:
BLACK MESH TOP BY
NATALIA FEDNER,
CHOKER BY **BOOTZY
COUTURE**, BLACK
LEATHER GLOVES BY
KRISTINA K

CHROME BODY ARMOUR
BY **KWK BY KAY KWOK**,
LEATHER BRA AND BRIEFS
BY **ZANA BAYNE**, SHOES
BY **GROUNDS**

wax figure yesterday. I ask if she can approve the final version, because sometimes the sculptures aren't exactly faithful renditions. She says she can, and hesitates a second before mentioning the notorious Cristiano Ronaldo statue that went viral in 2017 as a worst-case scenario. She pulls up an image of the work on her phone and shows it to everyone in the room, giggling impishly at the poorly rendered likeness of the soccer star. But within seconds, she recovers, remembering she's a global pop star who's supposed to be polite and poised. "I'm so sorry," she says, chuckling.

Karol pulls up a chair in front of me, ready to unveil *Bichota Season*. It's a new set of songs, but it's loosely connected to *Mañana Será Bonito*, which was the kind of breakup album that captured every messy, complicated stage of uncoupling: the sleep-deprived nights you spend scrolling through old photos, wishing they were still yours; the epiphanic realisation that your suffering isn't permanent; the parties you crash with your girls in search of relief.

Mañana Será Bonito chronicled her public separation from her former fiancé, Puerto Rican rapper Anuel AA, in 2021. Karol says the failed engagement – and the experience of processing it through the album – was emotionally taxing. The Colombian artist isn't known for making intimate music, but *Mañana Será Bonito* was steeped in the belief that vulnerability could offer a sense of autonomy. "The two weeks before the album came out, I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat," she says. "Being so exposed in my music was very psychologically heavy... Imagine something like this happening, and you have to tell millions of people what happened to you."

The fallout of the relationship was bitter and resentful, sparking dialogues and think pieces about toxic masculinity and misogynoir, due in part to Anuel's petulant online antics and fans' anti-Black comments about his subsequent partner, the Dominican singer Yailin La Más Viral (they have since parted ways). More recently, Anuel has resorted to tagging Karol in Instagram posts, seemingly mocking her song with Shakira, and taunting her at his concerts. At an awards show in June, he wore a T-shirt that read "You're with Feid, but you know that you're mine," a reference to her rumoured relationship with the Colombian reggaeton artist.

But while *Mañana Será Bonito* was about healing from the painful dissolution of a relationship, *Bichota Season* takes on a different approach. Here, Karol is ready to move on from heartache, welcoming an uncompromising new era. To Karol, *Bichota Season* represents both a personal credo and a temporal directive, declaring emancipation in the wake of romantic collapse. "I go over the strange moments, the crazy moments, the difficult ones in my head," she says. "The moments where I felt, 'I'm dying and I won't be able to deal with this.' It's what I had to go through to get to today."

'S91', the first track released from *Bichota Season*, was initially meant to be part of *Mañana Será Bonito*. 'S91' includes a spoken sound bite of Karol reading Psalm 91, a mantra of power in her family. "My mom would say that it was a prayer of protection – that nothing could touch us," she explains. The song didn't fit with the rest of the album, but it also didn't quite work as a bonus track on a deluxe edition. "If I had included ['S91' on *Mañana Será Bonito*], when people listen to the whole album, the narrative would have been lost," she explains.

So instead, Karol used that song as a blueprint and dreamt up the *Bichota Season* universe. In a sense, the album is much more confrontational, projecting a liberated future that still requires claws. Its title invokes the bad-bitch nickname she adopted in 2020 after releasing a song of the same name, though it originally refers to a Puerto Rican slang term meaning "a female drug lord". In the past, the moniker has garnered some criticism from fans, who suggest that repurposing the word for empowerment erases the violence and struggle surrounding the term's true context.

Karol says *Bichota Season* is about regaining "self-confidence" and "getting rid" of fear. "It's about a woman who feels proud of where she is, of everything she had to go through. Of never abandoning herself, of always having an internal voice that told her, 'Go, you can do this.'" She adds that there's a message of self-worth here, too. "They teach us it's wrong to celebrate ourselves for something we have. And it's not. We have to be the first ones to give ourselves credit." She thinks about how she's worked through her own fears and hardships. "A lot of things that don't scare me have happened in my life," she continues. "I'm not scared anymore, because I know I overcame them."

Karol hands me her silver AirPods Max, which are encrusted with crimson rhinestones in the shape of the mermaid doodle from the cover art of *Mañana Será Bonito*. She looks at me apprehensively, clearly nervous to play these songs for someone outside of her team for the first time (I hear her tell her publicist that she's curious about what I am writing in my notes as I listen). Before she presses play on her phone, she issues an important statement of intent about the album: "It's about my achievements and my successes as a person, but also in my career ... the mental freedom I have to experiment with things in life no matter what – without thinking about it too much."

The opening guitar strums of 'Mi Ex Tenía Razón' filter into the headphones, Karol's warm voice layered on top. A clatter of digital and acoustic drums cuts into the melody, kicking the song into high gear. It's pure Selena, an electro-Tejano lament that feels lifted straight from *Amor Prohibido*. The lyrics are sly and pointed: "*Mi ex tenía razón / Dijo que no iba a encontrar uno como él / Y me llevo uno mejor*" ("My ex was right / He said I wasn't going to find one like him / And I ended up with someone better"). It is seemingly a rejoinder to Anuel's recent single, 'Mejor Que Yo', in which he assures an ex that she won't find anyone like him. But Karol is plangent and clear in this retort.

Now I know exactly what she means when she says it's bichota season.

KAROL G BECAME a star across Latin America back in 2017, after releasing her debut album, *Unstoppable*. With the follow-ups *Ocean* and *KG0516*, she gradually built a reputation as a fan favourite in the world of pop reggaeton. In 2019, Karol got a fresh boost with 'Tusa', her hit with Nicki Minaj, which has been streamed half a billion times. Karol was a household name across Latin America at that point, but *Mañana Será Bonito* kicked off a whole new chapter of success after it amassed a pile of historic accolades, including the unprecedented *Billboard* 200 debut. "It's the start of some really *chimba* things for me and my future," she says.

For *Bichota Season*, she worked primarily with producer Sky Rompiendo, a fellow *paisa* who built his career making beats for J Balvin in the infancy of Medellín's reggaeton movement. There are also credits from MAG, the Dominican and Puerto Rican executive producer of Bad Bunny's *Un Verano Sin Ti*, as well as Edgar Barrera, the Grammy-winning songwriter who has penned hits for música Mexicana idols like Grupo Frontera, Fuerza Regida and Christian Nodal. There are some provocative collaborations, too – one track with corridos tumbados man-of-the-moment Peso Pluma and another with Dutch EDM tycoon Tiësto. She's also got two tracks with high-femme R&B vamp and fellow Colombian Kali Uchis: the first is a bouncy reggae breeze that appears on *Bichota Season*, and the second is an old-school reggaeton heater that Karol says may come in October. "We've spent a year and a half talking about this. We've seen each other, gone to the studio together; she's been at my house, I've been to her house. But Kali is like me,

"WE'RE DOING SOMETHING SPECIAL, AND I DON'T MEAN JUST ME. MANY LATINO ARTISTS ARE MAKING A MASSIVE EFFORT FOR OUR COMMUNITY."

"THEY DIDN'T EXPECT THAT BECAUSE THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT LATINOS STAND UP FOR LATINOS."

we're like 'zero pressure,'" she says. "We made a ton of songs, and she would tell me, 'I don't like that one,' and I'd tell her, 'I'm not feeling it either.'"

But it's the final song she mentions that is the juiciest: she tells me about a track she'd been working on called 'Verano Rosa', which Feid had planned to jump on. "It's a song about heartbreak, which is the best part of it all," Karol says, grinning. She doesn't explicitly confirm the relationship, but the comment feels like a surreptitious acknowledgment that *something* is going on between them. Later, in the rush to leave the hotel for her rehearsal at the *Today* show, I accidentally pick up the wrong phone off the couch, thinking it's mine. It's actually Karol's, and the background is a candid shot of Feid, slightly sunburned and smiling.

Ultimately, 'Verano Rosa' was never finished. Karol wasn't able to complete it, partly because it took her time to find the right collaborator. "[Feid] says, 'I know you've thought of thousands of people and no one fits but ... are you gonna let me get on that song?'" Karol recounts.

The two artists had known each other from Medellín, but they hadn't really kept in touch. "There was a long time when we didn't speak to each other, and I barely knew anything about him," she says. But when Feid started to break out of their hometown and chart across Latin America, Karol invited him to open her 2021 Bichota Tour. They previously collaborated on a song called 'Friki', which became a hit in Colombia. Yet Feid has unlocked a new level of fame in recent months – especially after his chart-busting hit with Puerto Rican rapper Young Miko, 'Classy 101', which recently made its Hot 100 debut. "You go and put on the radio [in Colombia], and it's like, 'Can we get permission for anyone else's songs to play?'" jokes Karol.

Karol has had *Bichota Season* on repeat lately, and on the car ride to the *Today* show's rehearsal, she cues up a couple of different tracks from the project. You can tell that she is thrilled about these songs, and ready to unleash them into the world. At one point, she puts on 'Bichota G', an irascible trap song complete with gunshot sound effects, and a display of Karol's ability to actually *rap*. When her song 'Oki Doki' comes on, she starts singing the lyrics, her index finger wagging in the air: "*No me digas puta / El error fue tuyo y la vida es mía*," ("Don't call me a whore / The mistake was yours and life is mine"). Some of Karol's best songs are these kinds of battle cries – manifestos that don't deny the hurt, but inch towards recovery and independence. And as a woman who's spent a lifetime dealing with puerile man-children, the line cuts deep, so I tell Karol it's extremely relatable. "They really start to say those things about you, as if you were the messy one!" she exclaims.

But embracing both sorrow and fearlessness is something rarely afforded to women in reggaeton. Karol has struck a protean balance; her music pushes against the binary demand for either sentimentality or aggression, pursuing full spectrums of complicated, imperfect emotion. In a genre where women have historically been reduced to uncredited chorus girls or sexual servants, Karol doesn't fall into either role. "Since we're little, at home, they tell us, 'Don't carry that, that's for men,'" she says. "And they start showing us – incorrectly – where we belong, where we don't belong, what we can do, what we can't do. When in reality, we can do everything." Karol sees the work she's been doing, alongside other women artists, as a step forward. "We are all paving the way."

Bichota Season bears a crucial message: flattening yourself in service of a lover is an ugly, painful kind of concealment. Sometimes, living inside the textures of desolation can guide you back to yourself and your power. "I swear to you, even in the moments when I've been super mega in love, I still make music about heartbreak," says Karol. "You can put on the saddest songs in the world, and it's as if you were killing yourself, but really, you're healing."

THE RESIDENTS OF Medellín have long been beleaguered by stereotypes of violence and crime, but as it often happens, that myopic view has never told the full story. Instead, Karol says, her childhood was full of joy. She was spared from Medellín's darkest years of narcoterrorism in part because she was born two years before Pablo Escobar's death. She grew up in a middle-class home and had a massive extended family. Her father, Juan Guillermo Giraldo Ramírez, has 13 siblings, and many had three or four children. "In Medellín, people are super family-oriented," she explains. "You spend holidays, Sundays and weekends with your parents, your grandparents."

She developed an early connection with music, thanks in part to her dad. Juan Guillermo played in a band in his free time, performing all kinds of music – rock, salsa, ballads. She would sometimes sing with him at special events. Still, at school, she was shy, and often relied on her older sister to speak up for her. "That confidence was given to me at home."

When she was 14, her father suggested she try out for the Colombian version of *X Factor*. She says she made it past the first three rounds of auditions, joining 10 other semifinalists after 50,000 people tried out. But she was eliminated before reaching the final competition. Still, Juan Guillermo was adamant that his daughter had a gift, and Karol was determined to pursue music. In 2006, she signed a record deal with Puerto Rican label Diamond Music, releasing a handful of tracks that never really took off, and her father ended up buying out the contract two years later. She was frustrated by the failures, and almost decided to give up on music altogether.

In spite of the adversity, Karol remembers that time fondly, especially because of her family's unconditional support. She and her parents would hand out CDs wherever they could – schools, universities, clubs, underground trains, buses. Or she'd go to the city centre, where she brought her music to street vendors in the hopes they'd include her songs on the bootleg reggaeton compilation CDs and flash drives they hawked. "They'd sell, let's say, something like *Reggaeton Hits*. So it'd be Wisin y Yandel, Daddy Yankee, and one Karol G, who no one knew," she says, snickering.

In 2008, Karol landed a meeting with Universal Music Latino, which offered her a deal as an in-house songwriter. But she was certain she wanted a career as a proper solo act, so she turned it down. Feeling lost and defeated, she went to New York to study marketing and live with her aunt on Long Island. One day while commuting, she spotted an ad for the Boston Music Conference. She decided to attend the industry event out of curiosity. It reinvigorated her, motivating her to return to music with renewed discipline. She packed her bags and went back to Medellín, where she took courses in composition, music theory and voice at the University of Antioquia for five years.

Karol had grown up listening to reggaeton, obsessed with Boricua legends like Ivy Queen and Wisin y Yandel, along with genre-defining mixtapes like El Chombo's *Cuentos de la Cripta* series. But by 2013, when she had returned to Medellín, reggaeton was taking a different racial and geographical shape. The metropolis had become a nucleus for a new reggaeton sound, first pioneered by artists like Fainal y Shako, Reykon, and Golpe a Golpe. "I wouldn't say, 'I want to be like Lady Gaga' in interviews," she remembers. "I'd say, 'I dream of being like Fainal y Shako.' That's how big they were."

Then a younger generation of producers and

"EVEN IN THE MOMENTS WHEN I'VE BEEN SUPER MEGA IN LOVE, I STILL MAKE MUSIC ABOUT HEARTBREAK."

PREVIOUS SPREAD:
CHOKER BY **BIANCA ARMER**, BRACELET BY **DEFAÏENCE**

THIS SPREAD:
SILVER JACKET AND TROUSERS BY **BUERLANGMA**, SILVER TOP BY **GIUSEPPE DI MORABITO**

CHROME BODY ARMOUR BY **KWK BY KAY KWOK**, CHOKER BY **BIANCA ARMER**

"THEY TELL YOU THAT YOU BROKE ATTENDANCE RECORDS. IT'S SOMETHING YOU DON'T BELIEVE; IT FEELS LIKE IT'S A LIE."

artists, including J Balvin, Maluma, Sky Rompiendo and The Rudeboyz, started to remake the genre, giving it a high-gloss, synth-forward, radio-ready veneer – a reinvention that has become a flashpoint for critiques about reggaeton's whitewashing and dilution into mediocre pop music. Karol says that Medellín producers didn't have the necessary drum kits or sample packs to make reggaeton in the more hard-hitting Puerto Rican tradition, so they invented their own style. "We didn't have the sounds, the files, none of what they had," she explains. "We'd try to make it so it sounded similar, but with what we had."

It wasn't until Karol met her longtime producer Ovy on the Drums that she really started cultivating her signature style. Ovy says he'd been called in to help with her 2013 single with Nicky Jam, 'Amor de Dos', and he went to Karol's house one day to deliver the final product. Ovy overheard Karol talking about how she needed a DJ to accompany her at shows, and thinking he could take advantage of the opening, suggested himself – even though he had no idea how to DJ. "He says that, and I turn around, like, 'You're a DJ?' 'Yes, I'm a DJ for some people in Medellín.' And I was like, 'So you're gonna leave those people in Medellín for me?' Horrible!" She laughs it off now: "My first reaction was like, 'Who is this? And why did he insert himself into this conversation?'"

"We didn't really get along at first," Ovy said in a video interview. "She didn't really like that I was so forward at that moment." But Karol gave him a chance. Ovy borrowed a sampler from a friend and learned how to DJ for one of her gigs the following day. After earning more of her trust, Ovy suggested they work on a song together, which became 'Ricos Besos'. Karol was immediately impressed. "It was like he took a chip from my brain," she says. "It was exactly what I wanted for the song, and that's what has always happened with Ovy." Ovy shares the feeling. "The chemistry was born in the first song," he says. "There's always been a fluid energy between us... Musically, I've given her my best and she's given me her best."

Soon, the pair started collaborating as a bona fide producer-singer team, similar to fellow Medellín-based duos J Balvin and Sky Rompiendo, or Nicky Jam and Saga WhiteBlack. They holed up in Ovy's father's apartment to record, using mattresses to soundproof the room. Eventually, they built a makeshift studio at Karol's house, with the help of some cousins, Karol's father, and friends; at one point, they even laid bricks themselves. "We'd make music every day," remembers Ovy. "I'd arrive at Karol's house at eight or nine in the morning, and I'd leave at 2am... Sometimes it'd be so late; I'd be so tired. And I'd sleep at her house."

Karol and Ovy have been working together for a decade now – he produced a few tracks on *Bichota Season*. He says that she's interested in more than just making hits. Her vision is more holistic. "She's a woman who has it figured out. She's always thinking about innovating, about doing something different. Not just musically, but in her image," he explains. "When we finish a song, she sees possibilities that you never saw."

And, of course, he points out how magnetic she is. "She can have a million problems," he says. "But you're always going to see her with a smile, always with a good attitude."

THAT ENERGY RADIATES from Karol when she's onstage at the *Today* show. During a break, she joins the hosts to greet her fans, calling them her "dream come true," the tooth gem in her incisor glinting in the sunlight. The audience members, sporting white, Feid-style sunglasses and traditional Colombian *vueltiao* hats, holler with glee, spilling out onto the plaza. This might as well be at an arena show. When the tenebrous opening notes of 'TQG' hit, the screams become deafening. "We're gonna sing this one real loud, right from here," says Karol, pointing to her heart. I look at the crowd, some yelling at the top of their lungs, others' chins quivering as tears well up in their eyes.

Almost as soon as she gets offstage, Karol has even more to do: first, she's shuffled off to do a rapid-fire interview called 8 Questions Before 8 am. Then there's an in-studio interview, this time with the hosts of the *Today* show. After that, some social hits. Then a third interview.

But eventually, it all catches up with her. After the on-camera conversation with the hosts, she heads back to the green room for a short break. It's been a hectic few hours, and she's been holding back tears of joy this whole time, never pausing to digest the magnitude of this moment. Once she arrives in the green room, she covers her face with her hands and begins to cry. The room hushes. Through breathy sobs, she begins to speak.

"So many good things come to us. I think it's so crazy," she says, her voice trembling. "Beyoncé, Shakira, Rihanna, Ricky Martin have been some of the artists [they've had here], and they tell you that you broke attendance records. It's something you don't believe; it feels like it's a lie."

Karol's aunt gently steps in to console her. "But mami, you've really fought so hard for this. All of you have worked hard," she says, gesturing to everyone in the room.

Karol lifts her face out of her hands and wipes the tears from the creases of her eyes. You can practically see the spunk returning to her cheeks. "I'm very happy. Let's go for more," she says. "We're doing something special, and I don't mean just me. Many Latino artists are making a massive effort for our community. It's really big what's happening, because they didn't expect that. They didn't expect that because they don't understand that Latinos stand up for Latinos."

One of her managers agrees, his voice breaking. "You see these things and you're like, 'One day, one day.'"

"Oh, no, everyone is gonna start to cry," says Karol, and the room bursts into laughter. In the corner, another member of Karol's team yelps, "Someone tell a joke!"

When she's done weeping, Karol walks towards a nearby monitor replaying her performance of 'Tus Gafitas'. The camera scans across the crowd, fans beaming and bopping along to every word. Karol shrieks, elated by what she sees onscreen.

"*¡Que chimba!*" ®

Rap's Next 50 Years

These are the artists who will help define hip-hop's next half-century

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TIM MARRS

IN 50 YEARS, hip-hop has transformed and taken on any number of different shapes and contexts while remaining undeniably distinct. You don't quite know why something is hip-hop, but it strikes you as immediately as any physical quality. The rap world has invented new forms of expression capable of adapting to the changes brought on by the expansion of technology like the internet, all while remaining true to its essence, the indomitable spirit at the heart of this culture. More than just artists, today's rap world is a constellation of figures all interlinked by the lineage they share with hip-hop's forebears. Whether they're rappers, producers, fashion designers or online creators, hip-hop is as stuffed with talent as ever. Hip-hop changes too fast to predict far into the future, but here are 20 figures who will help shape rap's next 50 years. **JEFF IHAZA**

BabyTron

"I DON'T KNOW what it is, but I feel like we got the sound that everybody wants right now. Not necessarily me, or somebody in particular, but just the state of Michigan as a whole," BabyTron told Rolling Stone in 2021. Over the years, he's become the Pied Piper of Michigan rap — the regional style of intense punchlines and goofy music videos. The internet adores his elastic flow and penchant for lyrical agility. If Babyface Ray and Veeze are the critically acclaimed rappers from Detroit, the ones who craft albums crisply and efficiently, then Tron is the city's king of the internet.

Tron is known to treat his raps something like a sport, opting to rhyme over complex, often multipart beats. On one end, you could say he's pushing boundaries in the genre, except it's hard to imagine anyone else rapping on the type of production he chooses. "You could have a person who only raps on some evil beats from Detroit. And then you got me, who does the funky techno stuff," he said. "It's just different bags out here." This spring, he dropped '100 Bars', a gauntlet of lyrical agility in which he rapped his way to the number 100.

Despite the viral antics, BabyTron takes rap as seriously as it can be taken. "I'm doing it every day. So it is definitely like the gym. Basketball, mic, booth. Same thing," he said. "I keep trying to make my punchlines more and more crazy, [add] more bits and pieces. Maybe it's four things that all go together in one line. That's all I be trying to do." Tron has also recently started to lean into his natural goofiness. When he is focused, he's someone who not only is good at rapping, but also sounds like he flat-out loves to rap.

JAYSON BUFORD

PHOTOGRAPH BY NATHAN BAJAR

Key Glock

THE 2021 MURDER of Young Dolph was grotesquely heartbreaking, but ask Key Glock and he will tell you that you have to stay strong for the family. The Memphis rap revival has been partly led by Key Glock, a cousin of Dolph. Glock's a traditional Memphis rapper with a slur to match and a pugnacious tone that adds to his arsenal as a rapper. If Dolph was the boss, then Glock was his lieutenant. Since Dolph's murder, Glock has been tasked with being the leader of Dolph's Paper Route Empire label. The ghost of Dolph hovers all over Glock's music. He's the next one in Memphis, even though that goes deeper than the chains and money. It's in his legacy. Glock's latest record, *Glockoma 2*, his first since his cousin was murdered, is a testament to rap's raw emotive spirit. "I just sat still. I didn't force or rush it; I had to deal with time," he told Rolling Stone of his process on the album. "I wasn't feeling it. It wasn't in me to record. I was grieving, bro. Ain't no way around it... Everybody has a date. You can't run from it, no matter what it is... When it is your time, it is your time. You got to wake up, live your best life, and be prepared." J.B.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: IMAGES WITHIN ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BRECHEISEN/GETTY IMAGES; EMMA MCINTYRE/GETTY IMAGES; PRINCE WILLIAMS/WIREIMAGE; SIMONE JOYNER/GETTY IMAGES; BRANDON TODD/"BILLBOARD"/GETTY IMAGES; CARY FAGAN. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: BRYAN GARVEY; SCRILL DAVIS

DD Osama

THERE IS AN uneasy pendulum of emotions when it comes to the violence in the communities where hip-hop flourishes, especially in the internet era. Though violence and its wretched association with Black youth has always been a discussion in the genre, today's young people, faced with the same circumstances endemic to America's underserved communities, have grown uniquely warped by the hyperspeed contours of social media. Perhaps no other rapper personifies that quite like Harlem drill star DD Osama. The 16-year-old has star power as long as the island of Manhattan. He rose to prominence alongside his brother Notti Osama, who was tragically killed in an altercation with a rival crew last year. This being the era of TikTok, Notti's death was immortalised in a viral dance originated by the group responsible for his death, spawning a craze that spanned far beyond New York. DD quickly became the frontman for the drill boom in New York, as his releases ooze the raw trauma of losing his brother at such a young age. In some ways, DD is a symbol of the kind of fame characteristic of his generation. He was thrust into stardom by way of personal grief, a familiar condition in 2023.

At 16, there's clear development to be had, but Osama's ability to wrangle pain and virality with an undeniable bravado is a sign of the resilience of talent in the current generation. Throughout his releases, you get a sense that Osama would have found fame regardless; 'Who I Am' has glimmers of a crossover hit, and 'Let's Do It' has a chaotic swagger reminiscent of the old Chief Keef videos. His debut mixtape, *Here 2 Stay*, from earlier this year, is equal parts vulnerable and pugnacious. Questions still linger about how prevalent a role gang violence plays in Osama's and other prominent drill artists' music. But Osama is unquestionably gifted in a world that increasingly seems built for maximum reaction. If anyone's going to be capable of navigating such an environment, it's him. Osama either inspires or revolts; either way, you wouldn't want to miss out on what he does next. J.B.

Lola Brooke

2021'S 'DON'T PLAY WITH It', by Brooklyn-bred rapper Lola Brooke, bursts with an easy bravado inherent to the young star's hometown. Nevertheless, the track garnered a delayed reaction, only becoming an inescapable hit, first on TikTok, earlier this year. The same could be said for Brooke, who spent close to a decade putting in the work in the same Brooklyn rap community that birthed greats like Pop Smoke. But hard work isn't a problem for the 29-year-old MC, who, since achieving viral success, immediately hit the pavement with a bevy of formidable features — like on Flo Milli's 'Conceited' and a legendary linkup with Ciara on 'Da Girls'.

In the span of one year, Brooke went from citing Meek Mill as a major influence on her music to having Mill tease a collaboration between the two. Despite the long gestation period for the success of 'Don't Play With It', Brooke was diligent in its promotion, releasing a string of remixes that capitalised on the song's internet explosion. Her upcoming full-length is one of the year's most hotly anticipated new releases, and she has already shown skill on April's 'Just Relax', which flips a sample of 'The Choice Is Yours', by New York's own Black Sheep, with a kind of localised flair that sets the song apart from her contemporaries' endeavours in classic hip-hop references. It's why Brooke is almost certain to make the kind of impact that the late Pop Smoke made. There's simply not an ounce of fakery in her grind. **JEFF IHAZA**

Little Simz

AS MUCH of the domestic buzz on UK rap has focused on the drill scene, London-born Little Simz has become renowned for albums meshing elements of grime, R&B, electronic music, and whatever other genre she and collaborator Inflo deem a fitting soundscape for her probing lyricism. Simz dropped *Stratosphere*, her first mixtape, in 2010. Her album *Grey Area* was a finalist for the 2019 Mercury Prize. In 2022, she won the honour with *Sometimes I Might Be Introvert*, her fourth studio album, which radiated effortless cool and charisma. **ANDRE GEE**

J.I.D

DREAMVILLE rapper J.I.D has had a cult following since his 2017 debut album, *The Never Story*, which drew on his autobiographical insights from growing up in East Atlanta, his ear for rhythm, his sandpaper singing voice, and his knack for lyrical precision — all attributes that have only grown more potent since. His storytelling reached impressive heights on last year's *The Forever Story*, which brought J.I.D's lore full circle with recollections of fighting and family — and at its most compelling, the literal intersection of the two on 'Crack Sandwich'. He has classic panache and a modern touch, somehow reminiscent of early Eminem, Q-Tip, and Big L all at once. And sure, he has the blessing and mentorship of his label boss, J. Cole, but he has a texture, technicality and acumen all his own. **MANKAPRR CONTEH**

THIS SPREAD, FROM LEFT: FELICIA ABBAN; HELLE ARENSBAK/RITZAU SCANPIX/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; TIMELESS

J.I.D PHOTOGRAPH BY SALIHAH SAADIQ BARNETT

Bktherula

WHEN YOU THINK of what it feels like to be young in the 2020s, it's hard not to conjure an image of a scene from a Bktherula video. Girls doing kick flips, fluorescent hair colours, impeccably baggy jeans. All set to spaced-out synths perfect for tripping mushrooms in a field. In other words, Bktherula feels "right now" because she is. She first rose to prominence with the 2020 single 'Tweakin' Together,' which had the ethereal, in-the-cosmos sound of internet-born subgenres like cloud rap, except with a trap-inspired cadence delivered with the confidence of a hip-hop prodigy. The song's chorus ("*And I know these niggas mad as fuck / Bitch I'm in the trap, with TM we throw it up*") landed on SoundCloud like a missile, racking up more than 100,000 plays in its first month. Born Brooklyn Candida Rodriguez in Atlanta, 21-year-old Bktherula personifies a generation of musicians who can tap into varied sounds and disciplines with ease. This year, she dropped her mixtape, *LVL5 P1*, which sounds like a distillation of the genre-flipping spirit you'd expect from an internet native. While rappers like Playboi Carti and Lil Uzi Vert deserve credit for bringing the melodic flourishes of rock and hardcore to the realm of hip-hop, Bktherula seems to embody the genres inherently. 'We Made It', featuring fellow rap-rocker Rico Nasty, rides glittering synths that build into an explosion of bass and chaos that sounds like a genre unto itself. She followed up with a record of acoustic takes on several of her hits, 'Love Nirvana (Acoustic)', which offers more proof of Bktherula's versatility. Those renditions are constructed with a ground-level understanding of the sound of hip-hop, as opposed to landing like the often-clunky YouTube-creator remixes of popular rap songs. Fitting, given how much of a bona fide rock star she is. **J.I.**

Central Cee

UK RAP PHENOM Central Cee has certainly kept busy over the past few years. He dropped his second mixtape, *23*, last February, which debuted at the top of the UK charts, and he's quickly becoming the face of London's resilient drill scene as the Chicago-born sound makes its way around the rap diaspora. Born Oakley Neil H.T Caesar-Su, Central Cee grew up in Shepherd's Bush in west London, an area that's integral to the current wave of UK drill, a scene that has been on the rise since the 2010s. Cee's raps have a calm and collected cool about them, but underneath, you get the sense there's a more deeply rooted feeling. Since dropping *23*, he's gone on to release the mega-viral hit 'Doja', capitalising on the hook-driven machinations of TikTok's For You page. The song got so popular, with its infectious hook, that eventually Doja Cat herself caught wind, popping up in Central Cee's comment sections joking about a reference to her on the track.

That's not the only high-profile connection the 25-year-old MC has garnered recently. After linking up with fellow UK rap heavyweight Dave for the joint EP *Split Decision*, featuring the crossover hit single 'Sprinter', Central Cee connected with noted UK rap fan Drake for a universally acclaimed On the Radar Freestyle. Cench, as Central Cee is colloquially known, did more than just keep his own alongside a veteran; the freestyle could easily make for a hit single on a project from either rapper. It's been a long time coming, but rappers from across the pond are finally becoming a major part of the US hip-hop tapestry, and Central Cee is sure to go down as one of the most essential crossovers. **J.I.**

CENTRAL CEE PHOTOGRAPH BY GRIFFIN LOTZ

LATTO

IN 2020, WHEN LATTO titled her debut album — and herself — *Queen of Da Souf*, it seemed more like a hopeful manifesto than a reality. She was 21, had been grinding since she was a 16-year-old contestant on a rap show helmed by Jermaine Dupri, and had barely cracked the Hot 100. And yet, Latto has rapidly made good on that title in the three years since, becoming a rising superstar thanks to a combination of diligence, development and strategy. "A lot of people just do this for a cheque: make a catchy song, and go viral," she told Rolling Stone as her breakthrough single, 'Big Energy', climbed up the charts last year. "But I was at the end of the real cypher come-up, the groundwork, passing-out-CDs thing."

Even now, as a budding titan, that selling-CDs-out-the-trunk fervour persists in her. It's what makes her sophomore record, last year's 777, feel so urgent. Everything she's put out since has been even better. You can hear how much sharper her already potent raps are from single to single, album to album, feature to feature. She's carved out a home for herself on the charts ('Seven', her hit with Jungkook of BTS, went to number one this summer), charged up Coachella, scored major-brand deals, and has been nominated for the Best New Artist Grammy. The rap game is certainly starting to look like her kingdom. **M.C.**

LATTO PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HART JR.

MAVI

MAVI PONDERS the permutations of existence like a great philosopher. The Charlotte, North Carolina-raised Mavi pursued both a rap career and a neuroscience degree at Howard University before releasing his brilliant breakout, *Let the Sun Talk*, in 2019. On last year's *Laughing so Hard, it Hurts*, he combed through the grief that engulfed him over the pandemic. "I lost some fear along the way of what it would mean for me to say truly how I feel," he told Rolling Stone last year. The world's better for his courage. **A.G.**

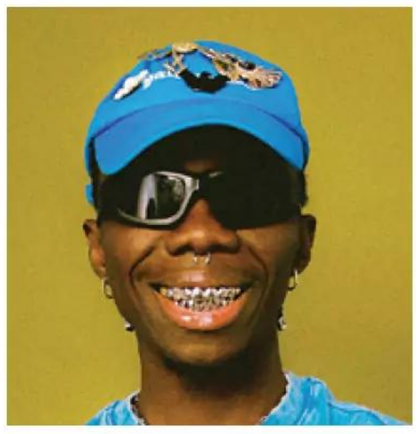
NONAME

HIP-HOP IS at its core protest music, born from the experiences of Black folks on the margins. While the genre's become a cultural and commercial juggernaut, artists like Chicago-raised Noname maintain an ethos that's adversarial to assimilation. "I don't do brand deals, I don't take advances. I don't like doing things I know are going to build on my celebrity because that's not ethical when I'm trying to be anti-capitalist." **J.I.**

THIS SPREAD, FROM TOP: JEFF HAHNE/GETTY IMAGES; TIM MOSENFELDER/GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: EDWIG HENSON; MICHAEL AGHARESE; RUEGUH

Ice Spice

WE LIVE IN an increasingly ephemeral world, where it's easy to chalk up viral success to the fleeting nature of social media feeds. And yet, Ice Spice endures. A year after her viral hit 'Munch' took over the globe, the Bronx native has managed to keep the world's attention. Her debut EP, *Like...?*, offered a framework for a different kind of rap star, one steeped in the snippet-driven ecosystem most young people engage with online, while retaining the bravado that built New York rap heavyweights like Cam'Ron. Taylor Swift was smart enough to connect with the 23-year-old for a remix of 'Karma', and Ice Spice counts Drake as a mentor. Maybe that's why Ice Spice, despite having released only a handful of songs, is such a force in the rap world. Beyond making bops, she's articulating a relationship to fame and social media that is decidedly Gen Z. It's OK if you don't get it, but don't expect her to be going away anytime soon. **J.I.**



BLAQBONEZ

BLAQBONEZ has been declaring himself the "best rapper in Africa" for nearly as long as he's been rapping publicly. The 27-year-old Nigerian got his start as a teen battle rapper in his native country and went on to release his debut in 2021, *Sex Over Love*, one of the best albums of that year *anywhere*. We're not weighing in on that Best Rapper in Africa title, but Blaqbonez's willingness to declare it, his unflinching drive to live up to it, and the skill of his execution is why we're not mad at it. **M.C.**

LUCKI

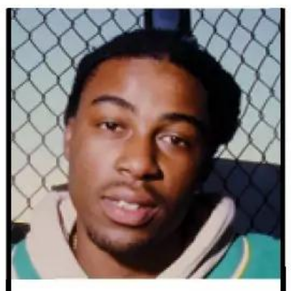
Chicago rapper Lucki built a steady fan base over a decade, while avoiding the pitfalls of young artists in the internet era. His searing vulnerability has made him one of rap's foremost storytellers. He counts Drake, Future and Playboi Carti as supporters, which is all you really need to know about his depth and range. Lucki's 2023 release, *Flawless Like Me*, is a vibrant distillation of his best talents and proof that the 27-year-old MC is only just getting started. **J.I.**

SAUCY SANTANA

HIP-HOP HAS been notoriously heteronormative for decades. As its patriarchal walls crumble a little, Saucy Santana has burst through them with killer attitude and an insatiable appetite for a good time. "I see a lot of records that are blowing up now aren't very calculated," he said at a recent Spotify event in his new home of Atlanta. "It's not like 'We have to reach this algorithm.' I see a lot of fun, free music is happening right now, and that's what I've always been doing." His uninhibited personality pops off his tracks, making them go viral, like 2020's 'Material Girl' and 'Walk'. As a gay rapper, he follows in the footsteps of all kinds of hip-hop changemakers, from Big Freedia to Yung Miami, to assert his talent, fashion sense, femininity and his right to express all three without remorse. "I wanna have my feet in every genre," Santana told Rolling Stone. "Two years from now it's giving the face of fashion, it's giving the face of makeup, it's giving Grammys, it's giving movies ... the shit that I can do in two more years, I can't even imagine," Santana says. **M.C.**

TISAKOREAN

TISAKOREAN STARTED out as a dancer and a DJ, and says he only started making music because he wanted a soundtrack to match his style. His brand of rap can best be described as silly. On TikTok, Tisa's dance videos rack up millions of views, thanks to the ways they remind you of how fun hip-hop can be. In 2021, he told Rolling Stone his fondest musical memory was a collapse of generation and genre courtesy of Pharrell Williams and Jay-Z: "When I seen the 'Frontin'' video," Tisa explains of the Williams and N.E.R.D. hit. "I didn't know that song was made *for* Prince." The rap game will always need its playful spirit, and TisaKorean is a perfect example of an artist who taps into that sensibility naturally. **J.I.**



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THE RAPPER 454 offsets his spaced-out production with a flow that's full of real emotion. His debut, *4 Real*, arrived in March 2021 as a fully realised vision of an artist with a clear point of view. On the standout track 'Andretti', he's effortlessly clever, delivering thoughtful bars with philosophical detachment. Born Willie Wilson in a suburb of Orlando, 454 has garnered a robust fan base, at one point earning a spot on Frank Ocean's Blonded Radio. Earlier this year, he collaborated with in-demand New York producer Evilgiane for *Fast 5*, an emotive take on the textured sounds that have made him one of this generation's brightest stars. **J.I.**

MIKE

RECENTLY, AT a packed show in Brooklyn's Herbert Von King Park, MIKE, 24, hosted his third annual Young World Festival, a celebration of the borough's vibrant underground rap movement. The rapper and producer is based out of Brooklyn and has been sharing music on Bandcamp since 2015. MIKE's serene raps feel like a live broadcast from his spirit, and he's bubbling into the mainstream with a rising generation of young fans. On his latest album, *Beware of the Monkey*, he balances emotional resonance with calm, soulful production. "I always thought about artists who have the ability to create their own world and build that from scratch or from nothing," he told Rolling Stone on the eve of last year's Young World Festival. "When I think about basically all the artists that are on the bill, it's people that have created those types of worlds with music and shit, at least to me." MIKE's innate sense of intimacy with his fan base is part of an increasingly potent form of audience-building among the current generation of rappers. Beyond being one of his generation's most exciting voices, MIKE is laying the foundation for the future. **J.I.**

Lil Yatchy

ATLANTA-BORN Lil Yachty entered the rap game at the ripe age of 18, introducing the then-ascendant genre of "mumble rap" to the mainstream. It didn't come without its fair share of detractors, but over the course of the past decade, Yachty has proven more steadfast in his creative vision than most, releasing an album of psychedelic rock as a follow-up to a formidable mixtape honouring the talents of Detroit's vibrant rap scene.

Yachty is also one of hip-hop's foremost nurturers of talent, known to create opportunities for up-and-comers just getting their start. In many ways, Yachty represents the collaborative spirit of hip-hop in the internet age: endlessly curious and open to trying new things. But his efforts haven't always been understood. His announcement that he was more than just a rapper ahead of his recent album *Let's Start Here* was met with criticism from some who saw it as turning his back on the genre. But that couldn't be further from the truth.

"I'm not speaking on all SoundCloud rappers. I'm speaking on me. This is for me, because everybody don't have that work ethic," he told Rolling Stone earlier this year. "Everyone ain't going to put the hours in to understand a new genre and how to execute something the right way." **J.I.**

Baby Tate

BABY TATE'S BREAKTHROUGH single 'I Am' gave rise to the pandemic's most viral affirmation. TikToks and Instagram videos featuring the song's opening credo — "*I am healthy, I am wealthy, I am rich, I am that bitch*" — inundated feeds as global lockdowns inspired everything but positivity. Back then, she still went by Yung Baby Tate, a moniker she's since shortened, perhaps inadvertently signalling her music's maturity over the years. She told Rolling Stone in 2021 that for her forthcoming projects she was planning on "going way more into an R&B space, which I've been kind of hinting at for a long time. You know, I'm not just a rapper. I'm an artist."

Since then, she's had breakout success with her Warner debut, *Mani/Pedi*, from last year, a rousing statement from an artist entering her element. Born Tate Sequoya Farris in Georgia, Baby Tate was raised by a single mother who was also a musician, and you can hear both her fierce sense of independence and reverence for women in the rap community in her music. **J.I.**

ROLLING STONE

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES; LAUREN DAVIS; GUNNER STAHL; JOSH BRASTED/FILMMAGIC; NUVANY DAVID; CAMERON MOORE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH EPIPHONE

RIFF'N'ROLL

As guitar brand Epiphone celebrates its 150th anniversary, we speak to some of the artists who have fallen in love with some of its finest instruments

By Mark Sutherland

JAMES BAY'S LIFE changed the day he strolled down Bleecker Street in New York and popped into Matt Umanov Guitars.

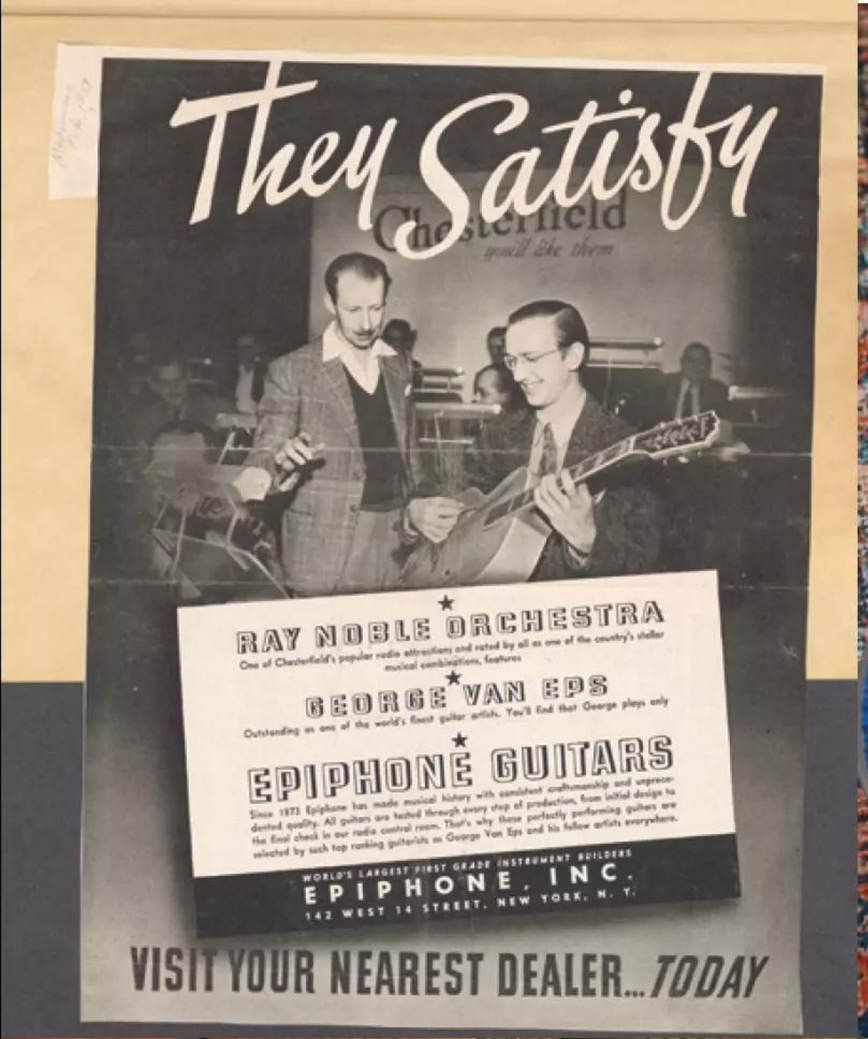
The singer-songwriter had just come from a meeting with Republic Records about his first record deal and was killing time while his managers continued negotiations. He certainly didn't have enough money to contemplate buying an instrument that day. But that impromptu browsing session would have a major impact on his career.

Because, when he met up with the record company later, all he could talk about was the 1966 Epiphone Century guitar he'd played in the shop: its cherry-red finish, its beautiful wood-grain body, its incredible sound. And when he got back to England, he found a package waiting for him, with a note that said: "We'd love you to have this guitar – and we'd love to work with you."

"A new guitar and a record deal on the same day," Bay laughs. "It was crazy. But it was a love-at-first-sight experience with that Epiphone..."

Talk to any Epiphone guitar player and you'll likely hear similar tales of instant infatuation. And there have been a lot of Epiphone players over the years. The storied guitar brand celebrates its 150th anniversary this year, during which time its instruments have been wielded by everyone from John Lennon to Noel Gallagher and John Lee Hooker to Joan Jett.

EPIPHONE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The ALOHA MAIDS (shown above) are featured singers and dancers.
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Write Dept. A-MS for catalog. Mention Instrument.
GEORGE VAN EPS METHOD for the guitar acknowledged to be the most thorough of its type available at $2.50 net.
3 VAN EPS' SOLOS, "Squattin' at the Grotto," "Study in Eighths" and "Queerology" are published under one cover at $1.50 net.
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SIX-STRING (previous page) Epiphone has an impressive heritage; (above) Abraham Alexander and his Epiphone Dove; (left) guitar cases marking the 150th anniversary

The company was founded in 1873 by Greek businessman Anastasios Stathopoulos in what is now modern-day Turkey. Originally, it made lutes and mandolins. But after the business relocated to New York, it was taken over by Anastasios's son, Epaminondas – who renamed it Epiphone in 1928 after his own 'Epi' nickname – and things really took off.

The company became a highly respected player in the burgeoning banjo and guitar markets. But when Epi passed away in 1943, the business ran into trouble. It was sold to Gibson in 1957.

The two firms had long been competitors. Gibson's current vice president of product, and Epiphone history buff, Mat Koehler, recalls an ad campaign where Gibson claimed, "Only a Gibson is good enough", and Epiphone hit back with the slogan, "When 'good enough' isn't good enough". Even Les Paul, he of the ultimate signature Gibson instrument, originally developed his solid-body guitar prototype, 'The Log', with Epiphone.

But while some brands disappear when swallowed up by corporate rivals, Epiphone has thrived under the Gibson umbrella, carving out its own niche as the guitar for those seeking an alternative.

"Anybody looking for something a little left-of-centre is going to find an Epiphone that fits the bill," says Koehler.

Current Epiphone players relate to what Bay calls the brand's "underdog story", but also praise its durability, accessibility and affordability.

Take Abraham Alexander, for example, who learned guitar by watching Gary Clark Jr play the blues on an Epiphone Casino and is now himself a Gibson Marquee Artist. Alexander's Epiphone Dove has been everywhere with him as his star rises.

"On the plane, on the tour bus, in the van – it's been through all the stages!" he laughs. "And it's held up incredibly. Sometimes, when a guitar costs 10 grand, you feel you can't travel with it or play it on stage. But that's what you have a guitar for – to play it, not to put it in a chest. It's meant to be with you through all these different experiences."

Rising rock'n'roller Emily Wolfe paints a similarly resilient picture of her first Epiphone, a black Sheraton.

"I beat it up, because I play very aggressively," she laughs. "But it will stand a lot of heat. That guitar is what started me as a professional musician. I'll always hold Epiphone close to my heart; it's the foundation of my career and songwriting."

The 150th celebrations include special, limited-edition versions of Epiphone's greatest hits – the Wilshire, Crestwood Custom, Sheraton and Zephyr – and the launch of a merch line.

Koehler notes that Epiphone is not concerned about offering "the cheapest guitar – but we do want to offer the most value". And these iconic guitars offer much more besides – helping to shape the sounds, the attitudes and even the looks that keep the rock'n'roll world turning.

Look at James Bay. Now he has his own signature Epiphone guitar, but when he broke through, he was so attached to that classic Century that it became as intrinsic to his image as his famous hat. More to the point, most of the songs on his debut *Chaos and the Calm* album were written and recorded on it.

"There's something approachable about an Epiphone guitar," Bay says. "It's very easy to connect with. I always want to go back to that red Epiphone. It's a wonderful relationship to have with an instrument."

Meanwhile, Wolfe – who has produced not one, but two signature Epiphone guitars – says the company's support has helped her blaze a trail through what has traditionally been a male-dominated world.

"I didn't really have any female guitarists to look up to when I was younger," she says. "I want girls to know it's about your playing, your songs and your music, not about the body you have. That's a mission of mine – so it's really cool when young girls gravitate towards the guitar itself after a show."

Alexander and Wolfe both also praise Epiphone for its policy of supporting newer, younger artists such as themselves, alongside more established names.

Not many things last for 150 years in the music industry. But, if the passion of its players and employees is anything to go by, Epiphone isn't going anywhere just yet.

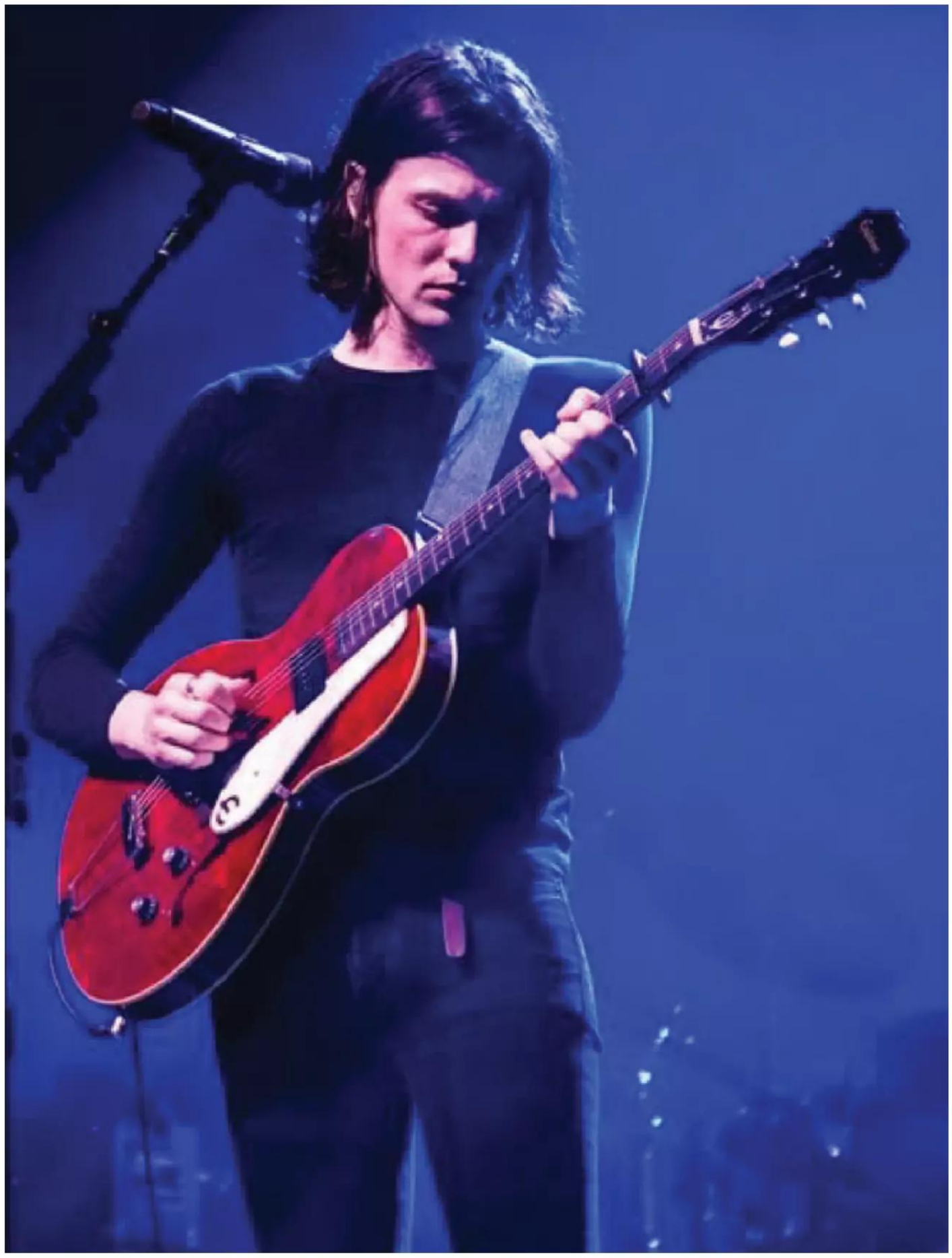
Indeed, post-Covid, the guitar is experiencing a sales rush. Koehler quips that this resurgence is "the best job security I could have asked for", while Alexander says it "shows the power of music".

"When the over-stimulation fades, what's real will remain," he says. "Even in the days of AI, you can't manufacture that feeling of holding a guitar."

That's why Alexander says he feels "naked" without his Epiphone Dove. That's why Bay declares, "Wherever you find me, you'll find an Epiphone guitar not far away." And that's why Koehler believes Epiphone could yet be with us for another 150 years.

"We've got this incredible team," he says. "We're engaged in our history, and we learn from it. With that on our side, we're going to make sure guitars matter more than ever going forward. As long as artists need tools for creation, Epiphone will be going strong." ®

PICK ME UP The special editions to mark the 150th anniversary: (from left) Wilshire, Sheraton, Zephyr DeLuxe Regent, and Crestwood Custom; (below) James Bay with his Century guitar



AUSTIN NELSON PHOTOGRAPHY; EPIPHONE; GIBSON

Great Love tells many stories

The Great Love campaign is a celebration of the UK's diverse LGBTQIA+ community and their stories.
Find out more at greatcampaign.com

Darren Styles OBE, Publisher

My parents owned a newsagents. The magazines fascinated me. Attitude portrayed a gay world that I wanted to be part of. I became the first gay owner of Attitude in 2016; Prince William was on the cover, with a quote about embracing and loving who you are.There is a community here where you can celebrate your diversity and your difference.

GREAT
BRITAIN & NORTHERN IRELAND

Reviews

Music

TENSION RELEASE

With her 16th album, Kylie, the iconic club queen, invites you to let loose and burn up the dance floor

Kylie

Tension

BMG

★★★★☆

‘*YOU LOOK LIKE FUN TO ME*”, purrs Kylie on the opening to her inescapable summer smash, ‘Padam Padam’. “*You look a little like somebody I know*,” she adds, her distinctive vocals cutting across percolating beats and throbbing synth licks. It’s an introduction that’s become a calling card to the dance floor, from 2023’s unofficial song of the summer. ‘Padam Padam’, with its onomatopoeic title and lyrics that see Kylie assert: “*I know you wanna* →

ILLUSTRATION BY
Sarah Maxwell

take me home ... and get to know me close" – is pure hedonistic joy, evoking sweaty clubs, new opportunities and the electricity of summer trysts.

It's no surprise, then, that the earworm has become a mega hit. Kylie's first song in over a decade to chart inside the UK top 10 has introduced the icon to a new generation of Gen-Z fans, and caused what is now being dubbed the "padam-ic".

The euphoric energy that pulsates through 'Padam Padam' is evident throughout the Australian star's 16th studio album *Tension*, each track sizzling with possibility. Minogue has explained that when writing began on the LP, she drew from her techno-laced, 2003 belter 'Slow', and unlike her previous two records (2020's *Disco* and 2018's country-pop *Golden*), she avoided having a theme. Instead, there was a focus on "finding the heart or the fun or the fantasy of that moment". You can hear that in the sugar rush of songs filled with reckless abandon, love and lust, and the restorative nature of the dance floor.

As with 'Padam Padam', *Tension* shines when showcasing its vivid sonics. The warm synth-pop of 'Things We Do for Love' is perfectly nice, but pales in comparison to the house-flecked title track 'Tension', with Minogue's vocal inflections and jangly piano riff making it reminiscent of a Charli XCX song. There's an early 00s Balearic bounce to the sun-drenched 'One More Time', lashings of Eurodance on perky '10 Out of 10', and 'You Still Get Me High' is all-out bombast – with its 80s synth-pop sonics and slinky sax riff, it's almost Kylie Minogue doing Bruce Springsteen at a disco.

The Robyn-evoking 'Hold On to Now' is a late-night shimmer, conjuring the same jubilation as Minogue's 2010 sparkler 'Get Outta My Way'. "*Baby what are we holding on to*," she breathes in the ecstatic chorus, the earnest lyrics accompanied by itchy, flickering electronics that ooze with tension. And then there's the slinky, nostalgia of 'Hands', all funky bass line and R&B inflections, complete with a bratty pre-chorus that asserts: "*I'm that cherry on the top of the cake / All up in your face / I'm about to give you a taste*".

As *Tension*'s predecessor, the glittering *Disco*, was the soundtrack to pandemic kitchen discos and Zoom parties, it's a joy to know that we'll be able to experience *Tension* outside the confines of our homes. This is a record for late nights with old pals and new romances, for dancing – and crying – in the club. Ultimately, it's brilliantly good fun. It's soaring pop music with a huge amount of heart that brings big emotions to the dance floor – much like its creator. **HANNAH MYLREA**

MIXED OFFERING COMES ADRIFT

The best moments of Royal Blood's latest album are drowned by the band's self-conscious attempts to experiment

MIKE KERR'S RAGING against the dying of the rock'n'roll light at Radio 1's Big Weekend was fatally compromised by a few things, among them the optics of a grown man throwing a tantrum in front of a largely teenage audience, but the chief issue was that Royal Blood were not, actually, particularly out of place at a pop-orientated festival.

Royal Blood

Back to the Water Below

Warner

★★★☆☆

Their stock in trade has always been pop songs based around hooks and melody, which they would then cloak with a bass distortion pedal to make them fit an unsophisticated idea of how a rock song is supposed to sound: loud.

This proved a lucrative approach on 2014's *Royal Blood* album and its 2017 follow-up, *How Did We Get So Dark?*. It allowed them to sell what is, in reality, pop music to a certain audience, one that non-ironically lifts devil horns at concerts and would ordinarily thumb their nose at anything catchy. Perhaps it was these people Kerr was trying to reach with his onstage outburst.

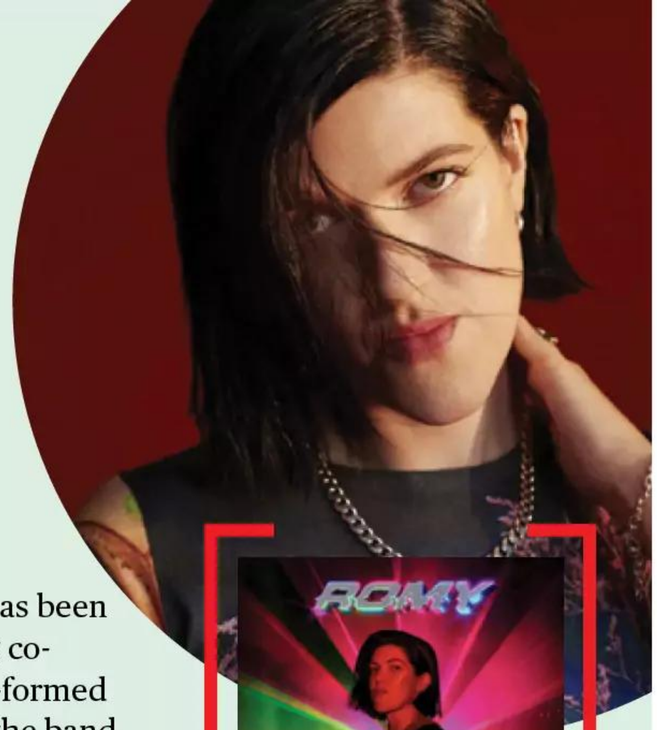
Followers of Royal Blood first attracted to them by their penchant for Big Fucking Riffs might be disappointed this time around. This is a measured record, occasionally to the point of being painfully aware of itself. 'The Firing Line' simmers but then fizzles out, as if they deliberately hold themselves back from a crescendo. 'Pull Me Through' and 'There Goes My Cool' are both bluesy rockers that bring to mind *Lullabies to Paralyze*-era Queens of the Stone Age, which to Royal Blood's credit is a guise they wear well.

Those are among the memorable moments. Elsewhere, there are myriad half-hearted attempts to infuse the distortion-pedal-go-vroom model with something fresh. Yet the changes in direction feel superficial: weird, sing-songy vocals on 'Shiner in the Dark', a deliberately stilted rhythm to 'Triggers', and a maddening habit throughout of shoehorning in their favourite backing vocal, that of the "*ooh-oooh*" variety, where it isn't needed.

The rock'n'roll cheque that Kerr wrote out up on that stage in Dundee has not been cashed on *Back to the Water Below*, because Royal Blood are not the guys to make an earth-shattering, bone-rattling argument for heavy music. Instead, they're a perfectly serviceable pop-rock group who, playing these songs, will not look at all out of place on next year's Big Weekend lineup. **NICK REILLY**

ROYAL BLOOD: TOM BEARD; ROMY: VIC LENTAIGNE

THE XX STAR FINDS NEON SALVATION ON THE DANCE FLOOR



SINCE 2009, ROMY Madley Croft has been known as the quietly entrancing co-vocalist and guitarist in London-formed indie trio The xx. After three albums, the band have dispersed to pursue individual projects in recent years.

Romy's debut solo single arrived in 2020 with the Eurodance-inspired anthem 'Lifetime', a life-affirming rave about losing yourself in the music with loved ones when we were all still bound by lockdown rules.

On her first solo album *Mid Air*, the artist follows those dance instincts and relives the "celebration, sanctuary and salvation" of the queer clubs and dance floors that made her, championing a sound that she calls "emotional music to dance to".

Tracks like the piano-laced 'Loveher' and sensual, sunshine-hued 'She's on My Mind' offer a glimpse into the more romantic side of Romy, while the soaring beats of 'Weightless' capture the feeling of an all-consuming infatuation.

But it's the pairing of intoxicating electro beats with such pensive lyrics that gives *Mid Air* its layers. The vibrant Fred again.. collaboration 'Strong' is as much a maximalist trance banger as it is a powerful comment on grief. "Y*ou don't have to be so strong*," Romy whispers on the cusp of an explosive hook. Later, she indulges in dance-pop ecstasy on the infinitely optimistic 'Enjoy Your Life', which samples Beverly Glenn-Copeland and sees Jamie xx assist on production duties.

On her debut album, Romy charts the collision of life's most visceral moments, where love, grief and queer joy can coexist on the dance floor – a place to fall apart and find yourself all over again in fleeting moments of transient refuge. **HOLLIE GERAGHTY**

Romy
Mid Air
Young
★★★★☆

NOTE-PERFECT

Jorja Smith
Falling or Flying
FAMM
★★★★☆

WHEN JORJA SMITH released her debut album *Lost & Found* in 2018, it was near universally accepted that hers was a voice that could define British soul for the next decade.

Break-up ballads and slow jams like 'Blue Lights' and 'Lost & Found' showed off her raw, emotionally charged talent, but there was still the nagging sense that Smith's reliance on these sounds risked typifying her music and, by extension, the whole essence of her artistry.

It's welcome news, then, that second album *Falling or Flying* sees Smith take the handbrake off her low-tempo sounds and speed off into a new place entirely. The bass drums and bone-rattling percussion on early single 'Try Me' add a dramatic dimension to Smith's work, letting her peerless vocal talent shine. Elsewhere, the club-primed beat of 'Little Things' goes far in proving why it's already become a remix smash in the hands of Jungle supremo Nia Archives. There is also a powerful collab with J Hus on 'Feelings', a sultry Afrobeats-primed banger that marks their second collab of 2023.

Still, there's plenty for old-school fans too. 'Broken Is the Man', a haunting ballad marked by Smith's stirring vocals, is one of the best tracks she's ever done, while 'Backwards' is an affirming break-up anthem in its own restrained way. All considered, *Falling or Flying* sees Smith doing everything in her power to continue on that path to becoming a generational voice. **NICK REILLY**

FEELGOOD FACTOR

THROUGHOUT ALL OF the innovation and experimentation of the electronic music scene since The Chemical Brothers formed at the tail end of the 80s, Tom Rowlands and Ed Simons have remained at the cutting edge. From the ecstatic rave of their 90s heyday to 00s pop hit 'Galvanize' and throughout a fruitful and experimental run in the 2010s, the duo have expanded their sound and become bona-fide festival headliners at the same time.

Rather than reinventing themselves, tenth studio album *For That Beautiful Feeling* simply keeps the wheels rolling. As colourful as its artwork and true to its title, the album is as hedonistic and propulsive as the duo's best work, all put through a psychedelic lens. Mixed together like the pair's impeccable live shows, *For That Beautiful Feeling* barely pauses for breath, instead serving as a brilliantly immersive, interconnected piece.

Through the constant euphoric thud, a handful of highlights emerge. The first is 'No Reason', an irresistibly funky house track that picks up momentum and ends up as a cacophony. Beck – who appeared on the band's 2015 track 'Wide Open' – also returns with a reverb-drenched turn on the woozy 'Skipping Like a Stone'.

After the four-on-the-floor punch of the album's first half, Side B is a more psychedelic take on their sound. 'Magic Wand' is punctuated with creepy, twisting melodies, while 'Feels Like I Am Dreaming' sets the duo's signature bass under an irresistible, slinky melody. The album, one of the best of the duo's modern era, is then sent on its way by its understated, blissful title track. As a voice repeats its title with a heavenly lilt – the same voice that opens the album – the music fades to silence for one of the only times across its entire length, placing you slowly back down to earth at the end of a trippy, masterful journey. **WILL RICHARDS**

The Chemical Brothers
For That Beautiful Feeling
EMI
★★★★☆

Greta and Hae Sung rediscover their bond

Film

MAKING A CONNECTION

When two close childhood friends meet again as adults, the result is a love story that spans time

Past Lives

STARRING	Greta Lee, Teo Yoo, John Magaro
DIRECTED BY	Celine Song

★★★★★

SOMETIMES a film comes along that has all the reviewers raving. Since *Past Lives* premiered at Sundance at the beginning of the year, it's been topping critics' polls at festivals such as Berlin, and now it's finally hitting the UK. I'm happy to say that it does not disappoint – it may be a slow-burner with no easy answers, but that's one of its many strengths.

The story of a woman who reconnects with her childhood sweetheart, it stars an excellent Greta Lee as Nora, who immigrated from South Korea as a child. Before she left, she had a 'date' with Hae Sung, and the two became firm friends. As young people, they reconnect on Skype, but the distance forces them apart.

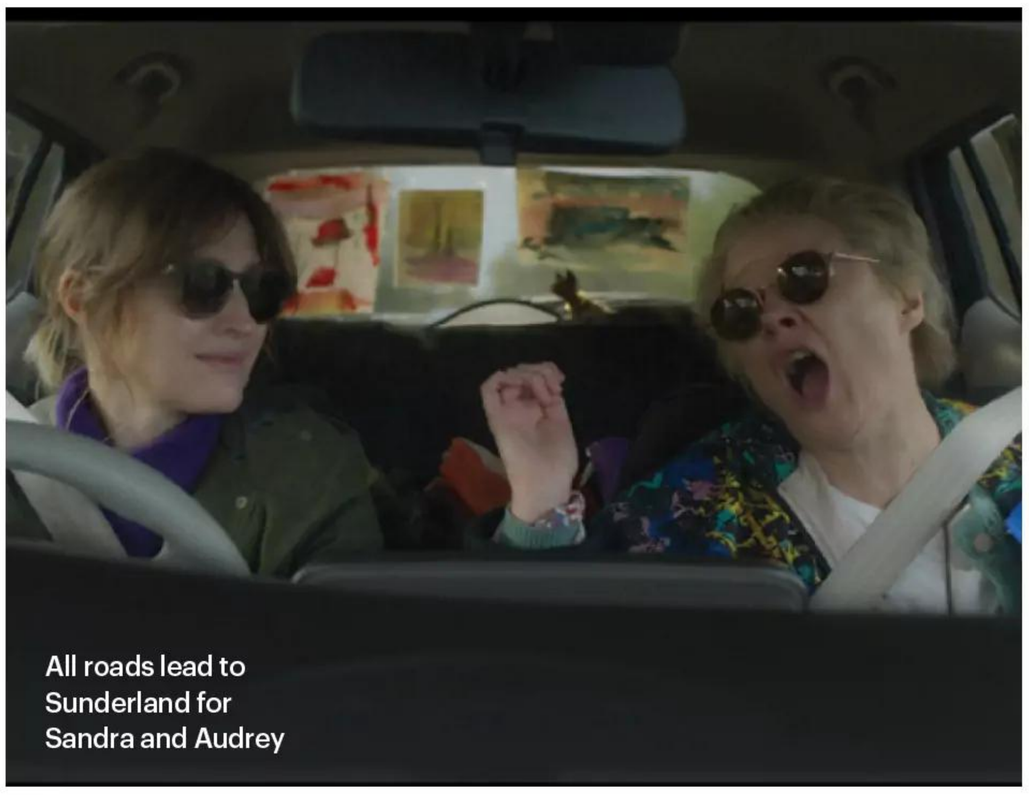
Years later, Greta is living in New York with her amiable American husband, Arthur (John Magaro). When Hae Sung (Tao Yoo) comes to America to see her, the pair clearly still have a connection, which throws all three of them into a polite kind of quandary. That's another of this film's strengths: everyone is a decent person who's trying to do the right thing, but – as in life – it's not always clear what that is, even if you're asking what's right for you. Nora enjoys her relatively sophisticated urban life with fellow writer Arthur, with whom she has plenty in common – but she feels the lure of the past when she sees Hae Sung, who has a wildly different life and outlook, but who represents a culture and a love she left behind.

The idea of the title is that people who make a connection, however slight, were together in a past life, and that thread is woven throughout the film. Is there an alternate universe in which Greta is happy with Hae Sung? Would that be better? There's a telling scene when Arthur asks Greta if she's truly happy, living with him in their small apartment. It's the kind of question that will resonate with many, as it focuses on life choices and the direction we choose. There's no bad guy in this scenario – it simply feels incredibly real.

It's no surprise to learn that debut director Celine Song is herself an immigrant from South Korea, who was inspired to write this by her own experiences. She's aided by vivid cinematography and universally strong performances: both Lee and Yoo evolve convincingly over the years. Meanwhile, John Magaro, who was tremendous in Kelly Reichardt's *First Cow*, puts in a supporting turn that's full of empathy and quiet charm. *Past Lives* has all the hallmarks of an arthouse hit, and it could go all the way to the Oscars – in one life, anyway.

OUT NOW **ANNA SMITH**

PAST LIVES: JON PACK/TWENTY YEARS RIGHTS LLC/A24; *TYPIST ARTIST PIRATE KING*:CAMP FILMS; *KILLERS OF THE FLOWER MOON*: MELINDA SUE GORDON/APPLE TV+



All roads lead to Sunderland for Sandra and Audrey

ROAD TRIP WITH ATTITUDE

Typist Artist Pirate King

STARRING
Monica Dolan, Kelly Macdonald

DIRECTED BY
Carol Morley

★★★★★

AUDREY AMISS was a British artist who was discovered after her death in 2013 – but this film is less about her art, and more about her personality. Bags of it. The great Monica Dolan brings her to life in a warm, witty film from writer-director Carol Morley (*The Falling*, *Dreams of a Life*).

Having spent years researching Amiss, Morley imagines a spontaneous road trip with the artist and her social worker, Sandra (Kelly Macdonald). During a routine visit to her cluttered London home, the eccentric Audrey insists that Sandra drive her to an art gallery, omitting the fact that it's in Sunderland. Initially exasperated, Sandra ends up forming a closer bond with her charge, who's as charming and funny as she is vexing.

As the pair drive through England in a battered little car, they have a series of amusing encounters. Audrey creates havoc by misinterpreting people and sometimes hallucinating – in real life, she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and paranoid schizophrenia. But this is no gloomy portrait of a failed, suffering artist. It's a poignant, insightful and amusing exploration of the joys of an unpredictable, artistic mind with a riveting central performance. And the title? That's Audrey's occupation, as she wrote it in her passport. Brilliant. *27 OCTOBER* **ANNA SMITH**

MURDER IN OKLAHOMA

Killers of the Flower Moon

STARRING
Robert De Niro, Leonard DiCaprio

DIRECTED BY
Martin Scorsese

★★★½☆

AT THREE AND A HALF HOURS LONG, Martin Scorsese's latest epic can feel like a bit of a slog, but patient fans will find it worth it for the performances, cinematography and striking stand-out scenes. The story of murders in 20s Oklahoma, it's adapted from the bestseller by David Grann and stars Robert De Niro as William Hale, a scheming businessman who's appointed himself the boss of a town of indigenous Osage people.

Hale desperately wants to obtain the oil on their land, and while his schemes to marry off his relatives to local women are tolerated, when women begin dying of a mysterious illness, he is implicated in something far worse. De Niro puts in a top turn as this sinister anti-hero, ably accompanied by fellow Scorcese regular Leonard DiCaprio as his nephew Ernest, who swallows everything his uncle tells him. It's a deeply disturbing story and well performed, though the balance between the characters feels a bit off: Lily Gladstone is great as Ernest's new wife Mollie, but we barely get to see her perspective. One for Scorsese fanatics. *20 OCTOBER* **ANNA SMITH**

DiCaprio plays De Niro's naive nephew

Loach signs off with a powerful message

SMALL TOWN SUSPICION

The Old Oak

STARRING
Dave Turner, Ebla Mari

DIRECTED BY
Ken Loach

★★★☆☆

BILLED AS the last ever film from realist director Ken Loach, this is a story of poverty in contemporary northeast Britain. Dave Turner stars as TJ Ballantyne, the owner of a proper old boozer called The Old Oak. The only pub in the village, its spit-and-sawdust vibe extends to the regulars, many of whom eye the newly arrived Syrian refugees with suspicion. But TJ is a good guy, and he and photographer Yara (a terrific Ebla Mari) help to integrate her people into the community with a series of events.

So far, so Loach, and while the dialogue doesn't always ring true, the setting does. There's no doubting the sincerity of the film's message. This is about community, kindness and sticking together in tough times, and the ending has the power to bring a tear to the eye. If this is Loach's parting shot, it's truly in character. *29 SEPTEMBER* **ANNA SMITH**

STYLE

WHAT WE WANT AND WHAT WE NEED

BY **JOSEPH KOCHARIAN**

Seeing stars

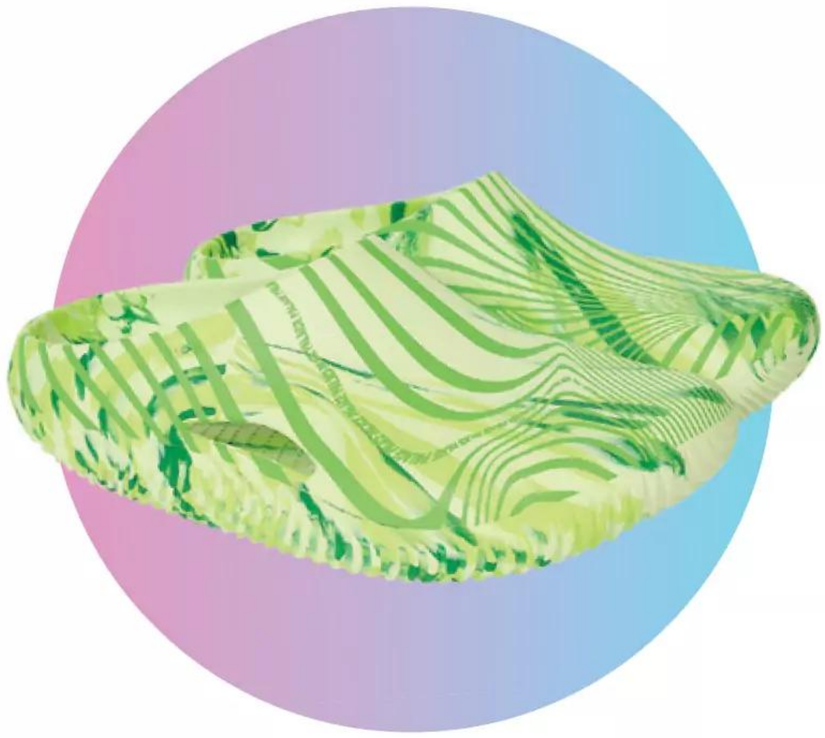
Amiri has looped in hip-hop duo Black Star to take centre stage for its Autumn / Winter '23 collection. Yasiin Bey (also known as Mos Def) and Talib Kweli have been photographed by Karim Sadliin for a campaign conceived by brand founder and creative director Mike Amiri exploring the multi-layered process of music production. Influenced by his LA upbringing, Amiri has particularly focused on 90s hip-hop for this range. A fusion of 50s and 90s Americana, the line boasts fluid tailoring and plenty of layering, with untucked shirts, patterned knitwear, and a dash of tie-dye print. The newsboy cap, which every model at the runway show wore, really drives the concept of this era home, planting us right back to pre-Y2K, with billowing baggy trousers and cargo pants lending an authentic feel to the looks.
amiri.com

Peak style

Luxury fashion brand Louis Vuitton is once again evolving its skiwear offering, both technically and aesthetically. The result is a collection that will take you from the slopes to the streets. For its 2024 range, the French fashion house has reached out to specialist manufacturers to create water-resistant closures, heat seams and padding to insulate you from mountain breezes. The line also focuses on layering, with cool graphics of ice landscapes and glaciers on their black and white puffer ski suit and a fleece and nylon sweatshirt. Accessory-wise, the brand has thought of everything, with soft shoulder bags, snow boots, knitted headbands, beanies, and après-ski gloves all splashed with the vibrant Louis Vuitton monogram and flower motif. From snowboards and ski goggles to socks and blankets, you can be clad in Louis Vuitton from head to toe in the snow.
louisvuitton.com

Crocs of the matter

Crocs are still riding the fashion wave following their style comeback a few years ago. Thanks to the insanely popular Jibbitz for unlimited customisation and super-fun styles, Crocs are worn by everyone from Jacob Collier to Justin Bieber and Bad Bunny. The latest in a long list of collaborations is with skate super brand, Palace. Available in two colourways – brown bone and celery (pictured) – the Palace Crocs Mellow Clog features a wavy line pattern inspired by chilled, psychedelic vibes. The limited-edition collaboration uses Crocs' Literide™ technology to keep you comfy as well as looking cool. As with all things Palace, you'll have to be super quick off the mark to get your hands on a pair.
palaceskateboards.com



Logo love

Louboutin is looking back to 90s street style with its new Astroloubi sneaker. Tapping into the decade's trend for maximalism, the brand has gone technicolour, with its its basketball and skate-inspired sneakers available in five colourways including 90s brights and cool Dream Phone-esque pastels. The retro feel continues with some collegiate nuances, including a 'CL' varsity logo which is giving us *Saved by the Bell* vibes. The shoe boasts a sportier, technical silhouette and is designed to be feather-light and super comfortable to wear. The label is known for its exuberant and lavishly fun designs, and the Astroloubi is stepping up to give us just that – but don't worry, the trademark red sole is all present and correct.
christianlouboutin.com

Pure and simple

Swiss horologist Audemars Piguet has teamed up with luxury clothing label 1017 ALYX 9SM to create a limited-edition watch collection. Minimalism is the order of the day for the four styles, with the dials stripped back to their simplest form to give a clean look. The two Royal Oak models (the 41mm design is pictured), crafted entirely from 18-carat yellow gold, have had both their hour markers and date apertures removed, while only the 3 o'clock date aperture remains on the two Royal Oak Offshore watches. The only other features on the face are the brand names Audemars Piguet and 1017 ALYX 9, so there can be no doubt that you're wearing this collaboration on your wrist.
audemarspiguet.com

Sweet melody

Having already introduced over-ear headphones, Montblanc has listened to demand and created true wireless, in-ear headphones for the first time. As you'd expect from the luxury accessory label, the design of the MTB 03 headphones is understated yet uber-chic with a focus on craftsmanship. The brand turned to renowned sound engineer Axel Grell for all the technical elements, including balanced audio tuning. The headphones have also been designed for optimal ergonomic fit, and come with noise cancellation, live mode and water resistance. Touch functionality allows for easy control of key sound activations, including playing and pausing audio and answering calls. Aesthetically, the headphones and case have taken style notes from the Montblanc Meisterstück pen and are crafted from deep black light-weight resin and adorned with the iconic Montblanc emblem. Music to our ears.
montblanc.com

SPOTLIGHT

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Me, Myslf and Austin

Man of the moment Austin Butler has joined YSL Beauty as the brand's global ambassador for its new men's fragrance, Myslf. After his Academy Award-nominated role as Elvis in Baz Luhrmann's biopic, Butler has plenty of exciting roles in the pipeline, including *Bikeriders* and *Dune: Part Two*. A favourite with directors such as Tarantino and Denis Villeneuve, he's the perfect match for YSL Beauty, which has a knack for sniffing out star talent including Troye Sivan, Yasmin Finney and Lila Moss. The video campaign for the perfume saw Butler team up with the Palme d'Or-winning director Julia Ducournau, while the editorial shots show him looking effortlessly cool as the face of Myslf. Blending floral tones like bergamot and orange blossom with wood accords from Indonesian patchouli, the scent is YSL Beauty's expression of modern masculinity.
yslbeauty.co.uk

IMAGE PROVIDED BY GREG WILLIAMS FOR YSL BEAUTY

Clothe and connect

Always one for innovation and reinvention, Selfridges is launching its very own Yellow Pages with a smorgasbord of projects to keep you connected, just like the phone book of yore. Part of the project is a 72-page zine focusing on Autumn/Winter '23 offerings. New talent is at the forefront of the London store this season, as it marks 30 years of the British Fashion Council's NEWGEN programme with a celebration of the current cohort of emerging designers in the Old Selfridges Hotel. Elsewhere, The Corner Shop sees the opening of Versace Icons, showcasing definitive wardrobe pieces inspired by the label's decades of dressing courageous and powerful women. Looking to the future, clothing designed by Martine Rose will be showing in the Designer Street Room, while in the Designer Galleries, Nina Ricci by Harris Reed will be on sale, with both brands featuring pieces exclusive to Selfridges.

And there's plenty more to keep you engaged at the London store beyond refreshing your wardrobe. Tuck in at Jackson Boxer at The Corner restaurant, for a tasting menu utilising the best of local ingredients, or feed your mind with the limited-edition books and magazines on sale at the Jil Sander Kiosk. For entertainment, there's a new permanent event space, the Selfridges Lounge, which has its first residency from Jamz Supernova Selects who will host 24 bookable events, talks, showcases and DJ sets over six weeks in September and October. A magnet for film fans is Selfridges x ICA's week-long takeover of cinema at the store championing the very best independent film, new fiction, documentaries and animation. Finally, as you enter or leave the store, take a look at Danny Boyle's *Free Your Mind*. The inaugural production at Manchester arts venue Factory International, a Selfridges partner, will be showing in the shop windows.

selfridges.com

YELLOW FEVER Shop for designs by Kid Cudi (above), and NEWGEN's Conner Ives (left). Or have your clothes altered or repaired at Sojo, set up by Josephine Philips, (far left). Kristen McMenamy (right) is the face of the campaign

LUXURY ACCESSORIES

BY
JOSEPH KOCHARIAN

Sporting chance

Ultimate athleisure is the cornerstone of Clarks' latest update to its Craft Sports sneaker range. The trainers exude a retro 70s vibe, with the Craft Rally Ace and Run Tor celebrating fashion's love affair with all things vintage. Old-school style cues have been taken from Clarks' original DNA and brought up to date to keep the collection fresh and contemporary. Effortless movement is central to the Craft Sports line, with ultra-supportive cushioning, moulded footbeds and ultra-light construction adding spring to your step. The feel-good vibe continues with the responsible crafting processes used to create the range. Clarks has combined recycled and bio-based materials, as well as sourced leather and suede from tanneries that are committed to reducing their environmental footprint. And if you want a mini-me moment, Clarks has also created the Craft Tor K for kids. With this collection, the brand is making all the right moves.
clarks.co.uk

Do the crocodile rock

For its 40th anniversary next year, THOMAS SABO is renaming its TS Exclusive collection TS 1984 to commemorate the brand's founding year, as well as expanding its range of glittering jewellery and accessories. Animal magnetism and mysticism are always intertwined with THOMAS SABO's designs, and this season, it's the crocodile's turn for a glow-up. The new Crocodile Rocks series takes inspiration from the creature known for symbolising endurance, healing and protection from spiritual wounds. The unisex collection, which already comes in blackened 925 sterling silver, now comes in 18-carat yellow matt and polished gold-plating to mimic the crocodile's scales, while red tiger's eye, obsidian and imitation malachite lend colour and mystical brilliance. Choose from a pendant necklace, earrings, bangles, beaded bracelets and rings. Time to snap up some sparkling style.

Sold exclusively in THOMAS SABO stores and online thomassabo.com

FAVOURITE THINGS

Bracelet with imitation malachite and red tiger's eye beads, £149

Yellow gold-plated ring with crocodile detailing, £159

Small yellow gold-plated ear studs with red stones, £98

Yellow gold-plated ring with 3D crocodile design, £549

Wide yellow gold-plated ring with crocodile detailing and red stones, £349

Yellow gold-plated bracelet with obsidian and red tiger's eye beads, £159

Yellow gold-plated bangle with crocodile detailing, £498

Yellow gold-plated hoop earrings with green stones, £298

RS ROAD TEST

In which we are introduced to one of the world's newest car brands, with style and sustainability at its heart, and discover that if we've seen the future, it works

Graham Norton once said of Cork, his birthplace, that "it wasn't the end of the world, but you could see it from there." He had a point. Head out to the coast from the Irish city, look south-west and there's nothing but a lot of water between you and anywhere else. Next stop, Brazil, in fact. Such things give you a sense of scale, and realising just how small you are is no bad thing once in a while.

Your mind goes to these places (wonderment, rather than Cork) when on a road trip. Or at least mine does. There's nothing quite like miles rolling beneath the wheels to free the soul, and here amidst the green kaleidoscope of the Emerald Isle's countryside, I am, so to speak, momentarily away with the fairies. Or the leprechauns.

Not least because my mode of transport, the Polestar 2 I've come to try, is completely silent in operation, leaving me — periodically — alone with my thoughts. For better or for

worse. And, having established that the port of Santos is 6,329 nautical miles and 26.4 days from the port of Cork, I can rest and return to the present and my immediate surroundings. Which are lovely.

You could be forgiven — just — for never having heard of a Polestar, though there are now close to 20,000 of them on UK roads. A former sister company of Volvo, Polestar is still as Swedish as IKEA, but it's now an independent, NASDAQ-listed maker of premium electric vehicles and — perhaps uniquely for the moment — sees EV manufacture not just as a means to an end, but as a whole-life commitment to completely sustainable motoring. Of which, more later.

The Polestar 2 is, as its name suggests, the second Polestar product line, in the form of a compact saloon. The first (1, obviously) was a high-end sports coupé, 3, 4, and 5 (all unveiled, but not on sale until 2024) are a full-size SUV, a four-door coupé, and a high-end super-saloon, respectively. Bottom line: this is a serious enterprise with massive capability and a full-house plan; that it hadn't built a car before 2017 should be seen as no guide to future performance.

Polestar 1 and now Polestar 2 have styling echoes of their prior Volvo siblings — square in silhouette, stance, and about the shoulders, and more than a touch of Scandi minimalism in execution both outside and within the cabin. And that's no bad thing: simple is often beautiful, and there's an inherent elegance to a less is more philosophy. Models to come are more distinctive still, smoother in outline and future-facing in terms of styling, but the fundamentals of clean design carry forward.

In the here and now, the Polestar 2 is good-looking kerbside, a great place in which to ride and drive, and its on-road manners — thanks to a 500-strong UK-based development and engineering team (this is a brand with a global footprint) — exemplary on some of the most broken roads in Europe. (In a surprising twist, the UK's neglect of infrastructure has led to inward investment.) And, of course, progress, thanks to the electric underpinnings, is swift and quiet, save for distant wind and tyre noise at higher speeds. That never happened, should the Garda show any retrospective interest.

Performance and range are interlinked. For the record: a single-motor Polestar 2 (from £44,950) is quick enough, with 268bhp and an impressive range of 339 miles, while a quicker dual motor (from £52,950) delivers 416bhp (469bhp for the Performance Pack) and a still-healthy 368-mile range. You pays your money and takes your choice.

But before you do, let me return to the sustainability note. Polestar has a 'moon shot' goal to produce a zero-impact car by 2030. And if you think that can't be done, listen up. Every Polestar 2 comes with a Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) report that calculates the carbon footprint of the car's manufacture and, more helpfully, a guide as to how to offset that.

So, for example, if you live in Europe and charge your car using electricity derived from renewables, rather than driving, say, a similarly sized Volvo XC40 with an internal combustion engine, by the time you've driven 25,000 Polestar miles, you'll break even on the car's lifetime emissions, manufacture included. Thereafter, your mobility impact is in credit.

I know. It may not (yet) be the future of motoring, but you can see it from here.

DARREN STYLES

QUICK STATS

POWER
268BHP

TORQUE
361LB/FT

0-60MPH
6.2 SECS

TOP SPEED
127MPH

RANGE
339 MILES

PRICE
£44,950

POLESTAR.COM/UK

Beverley Knight

As one of the undisputed queens of British soul prepares to drop new album* The Fifth Chapter, *the singer, actor and TV star reflects on the artists that inspired her and how her musical debut in* The Bodyguard *changed her life

JULIAN BROAD

Who were the Black British female singers you took inspiration from when you were thinking about starting a career in music?
Mica Paris, of course. I [remember thinking], 'She is the best thing I've ever heard from this country, hands down.' There was also Caron Wheeler, who was part of the Soul II Soul collective. Before both of those women was Jaki Graham. She was someone I could see on TV as a young child. Seeing her in Wolverhampton town centre was a real watershed moment for me. I was only about 11 or something. I went up to her and I said, "Can I have your autograph, please?" That world became close to me. And I knew I could do it.

A lot of artists struggle to listen back to their early material. What is your response when you revisit your debut album *The B-Funk*?
I love it! I do listen to 'Flavour of the Old School' and think I sound like a pipsqueak. I sound like a child and in a lot of ways I was. There's a hell of a lot of naivety in that vocal, but it was joyous. It was of course naive because it was 30 years ago when I actually recorded it. I had a damn good start. I had a lot of great people around me who helped me.

It sounds like you always had a clear sense of your vocal style. Is that right?
I did... Because I never stopped singing! When I got into a studio, even though the studios were alien to me, I would perform the way I perform on stage or in church. And I just gave free rein to what was in my head. Aretha, Whitney, Chaka – they became my unofficial vocal tutors. The first one was Sam Cooke, when I was tiny, but later on, it was those women who took the reins.

You scored your first UK top 10 hit with 'Shoulda Woulda Coulda'. Were you chasing a hit with that song?
Oh my God, no. The record label had the idea to send me to Nashville to write with great writers. I wasn't there to write hits; I wanted to write some great songs. I wrote 'Shoulda Woulda Coulda' as a ballad [with country songwriter Craig Wiseman]. Kevin Clark [an A&R executive] heard it and thought, 'That's a hit record if it's sped up.' So, I very begrudgingly went into the studio and recorded it at mid-tempo. He was absolutely correct. I was proved wrong. Everybody else in the label had heard a hit. I take no credit for that because I didn't hear it. I just thought I'd written a really good song!

Your last album, *BK25* (2019), was recorded live at the Royal Festival Hall to mark your first 25 years in music. How did that idea emerge?
It had been such a tough journey. Very meandering. [My career] had gone in places I hadn't expected it to go. And I wanted to just say, "Well, this is me 25 years in. It hasn't been a bed of roses, but I'm still here." I'm a British, Black, solo, female artist. When you put those words together, do you know how infinitesimal the numbers are of people who have sustained a career? The numbers are tiny. I'm still in the public sphere. I'm doing it on a mainstream platform. That is the best thing that I can say about my career. And I wanted to celebrate it all. So, I did!

"I had a damn good start. I had a lot of great people around me who helped me"

This year, you won an Olivier Award for your role in the musical *Sylvia*. What went through your mind when you made your musical theatre debut in *The Bodyguard* a decade ago?
Before I went into musical theatre, it was always seen as the thing that an artist did when things were really not great. I was well aware that the musical theatre industry would look at me with a raised eyebrow [as if] to say, "Can she really do this?" Well, I knew I could. I'd spent a life singing those [Whitney Houston] songs because I loved them so much, and I loved her so much. And it was so successful, more successful than I had realised it would be. **NICK REILLY**

SLINGSBY™

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NEW

Inspired by its spa town heritage and enjoyed around the world, Slingsby premium gin is crafted with pure spring water and real fruits to create the finest, award-winning British gin. With initial floral hints of violet, followed by notes of rich blackberry jam, Slingsby's Blackberry Gin is a bright, fruity and refreshing spirit.

Bottling the beautiful and restorative nature of Harrogate for you to experience with every sip.

SLINGSBY BRAMBLE

50ml Slingsby Blackberry Gin
25ml freshly squeezed lemon juice
12.5ml sugar syrup
12.5ml Crème de Mure

Add the Blackberry Gin, lemon juice and sugar syrup to a cocktail shaker and shake with ice until chilled. Strain into an old fashion rocks glass filled with crushed ice. Drizzle the Crème de Mure over the ice and garnish with a lemon wheel and fresh blackberries.

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spiritofharrogate.co.uk

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AUDEMARS PIGUET

Le Brassus

SEEK BEYOND

CODE 11.59
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STARWHEEL

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SLOANE STREET · HARRODS FINE WATCHES
AP HOUSE LONDON : NEW BOND STREET